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he Darkest Closet
Old Judge Priest in a detective novelette

IRVIN S. COBB

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here Angels Fear to Tread
e Shadow and the Shadowed
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ho Killed the Mermaid?
argin of Safety
e Police Are on the Stairs
e Pipes Are Calling

ANTHONY BOUCHER
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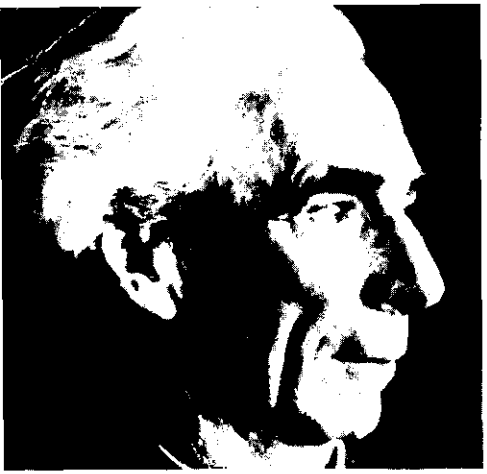

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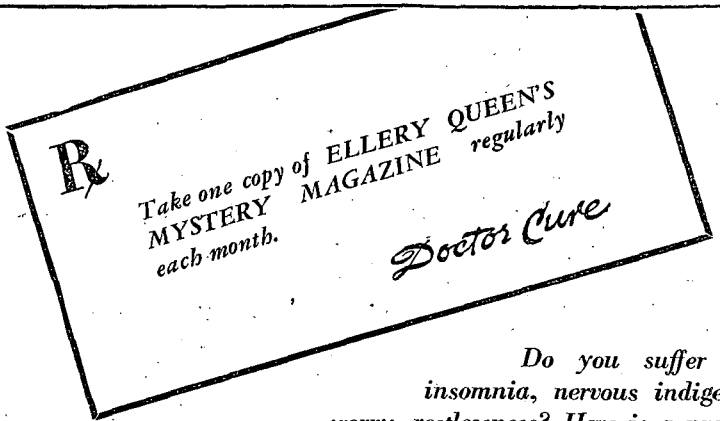

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"Life is continually weighing us
in very sensitive scales . . ."
— JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

What is an author's autograph worth in dollars and cents? Among detective-story writers the most valuable signature is unquestionably that of the Founder. Just as Edgar Allan Poe ranks first chronologically, creatively, and critically, so specimens of his beautifully legible and artistic handwriting rank first in coin of the realm. It is pitifully ironic that today a Poe autograph commands a higher price than most of Poe's stories earned for him in his own lifetime — yes, even with the holograph manuscript thrown in at that time. Today any letter written by Poe, no matter how trivial in content, would be worth at least $250. You won't believe it, but it is perfectly true that forgeries of Poe letters — admitted, acknowledged forgeries — have brought from $50 to $100 at public auction! A mere signature of Poe, cut from a letter or envelope, would sell today for at least $50.

But this is in the stratosphere of mystery writers' autograph-values. Let's get back to earth. We have before us a mimeographed catalog dated July 1946 which offers "a most interesting and varied collection of autographs of celebrities," and as we run our eyes down the listings, we confess to being shocked. We have not only got back to earth, but we have plunged underground! Among authors who have written detective stories we find autographs by Cleveland Moffett and S. J. Perelman offered at — yes, we are serious, we might even say dead-serious — 10 cents each! In the 15-cent class are included such authors as Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, Fannie Hurst, Clarence Budington Kelland, Brander Matthews, Arch Oboler, and Mary Roberts Rinehart.

For reasons known only to the dealer, Rupert Hughes and Kathleen Norris are higher in the scale — 20 cents each. And Marie Belloc Lowndes and Hugh Lofting autographs are comparatively expensive — each is priced at 25 cents. Is it merely a case of supply and demand, those twin gods whose names might be Eco and Nomics? It is beyond our ken, for in the same catalog we find an autograph of Richard Le Gallienne priced at the relatively astronomic figure of 75 cents.

On the other hand, we have before us another dealer's catalog, which also offers "a fine collection of autographs at bargain prices" — at the far more impressive evaluation of "50 cents per item." Yes, at 50 cents each

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you can buy the autographs of such serious writers as Robert Frost, William Rose Benét, Lord Macaulay, John Dos Passos, and Harold Bell Wright. Also included at 50 cents each, and representing the ubiquitous detective-story writer, are autographs of Ellery Queen (we are deeply touched and honored) and Irvin S. Cobb.

But it is not because Irvin S. Cobb is ranked autographically at the 50-cent level that we now bring you "The Darkest Closet." This short treatise on detectival John Hancocks is merely another example of our usually irrelevant, and sometimes irreverent, 'tec trivia. No, we bring you "The Darkest Closet" because primarily it is a fine example of Irvin S. Cobb's whoduniting, and secondarily because it is one of the few tales by Mr. Cobb in which his famous character, Old Judge Priest, that lovable Kentuckian with his "dry humor and rich humanity," plays the role of a detective, and plays it to the hilt. Indeed, Irvin S. Cobb's contribution to the detective-crime field, like O. Henry's before him, has too long been unhonored and unsung — in fact, almost completely ignored. We seriously plan to take those steps necessary to remedy the situation . . .

THE DARKEST CLOSET

by IRVIN S. COBB

Reelfoot Lake is the largest fresh-water lake south of the Ohio River. It is the weirdest and the strangest, the most mysterious and the most sinister. Also, it's the newest. It was created by the great earthquakes of 1811.

There was one shock that shifted the course of the Mississippi River, and that must have been some shift. There came a second which practically made over the Madrid Bend country of west Tennessee and southwestern Kentucky. Then there was a third which crumpled down and depressed an area roughly sixty-five miles in length and of an average width of about seventy miles. The same shock split a fissure through to the Mississippi, so that for three days the Mississippi ran north through the funnel, to fill up that gaping hollow and overflow the sunken lands bordering it. In Reelfoot there are stretches where on still, cloudless days a man in a boat, peering downward into the saffron depths, can see the slime-festooned upper boughs of drowned trees still standing and staunch after more than a century.

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There are other places, deeper still, and by local belief these spots mark the mouths of subterranean tunnels and passages by which the great carrion-loving gars and catfish may go out to the river and back again, regardless of water levels above.

Before now, bloody things and tragic things have come to pass here, and it was here, a few years back, that there came to pass a tragedy which is the cause and the excuse for this story's being written, the story, in fine, of a certain elderly Kentuckian's first appearance as an amateur detective. Considerably more than a decade later he would take on the same calling, temporarily, but this prior business signalized his dedicatory performance in the role.

Properly, the story begins, not by the pumpkin-colored waters of Reelfoot nor upon its reedy margins, but somewhat farther north of that grim theater, under the roof of the ancient courthouse in the ancient town where for so long Circuit Judge William Pitman Priest reigned as a benevolent despot over a generally satisfied constituency.

It was one of those flawless, cool-warm days of early October when the Southern summer is putting on flaunting colors. The busy sweet gum, which reared almost against the north wall of the old courthouse, was shaking a cosmetic bough, all purple and scarlet and weathered green, in at the nearmost raised window, as Judge Priest came and stood on the threshold of his private chamber opening off the courtroom proper.

Here was where, for going on forty years now, he had presided over Circuit Court. But this afternoon County Court was in session. County Judge Dyke being ill, Major Randolf Pitman was sitting in his stead by temporary appointment. Major Pitman was one of the younger members of the home bar, a veteran of World War I, one stiffened arm attesting that his had been active service. He likewise was Judge Priest's nephew, in whom the old man was well pleased.

Perhaps a desire to see how his kinsman would acquit himself in the judicial capacity had drawn the uncle to the doorway flanking the bench. Certainly it could not have been any deep regard for the barrister in the case that had brought him hither. Of all the lawyers in town the Honorable Horace Maydew, former state senator, was the only one not on friendly terms with Judge Priest.

This ambitious gentleman was seated between his two clients, one a pretty, slender girl in her later teens, and the other a plumpish woman who, you would have said offhand, was in the early forties; and both of them were dressed in all-black. The right hand of the woman was clumped in surgical bandages. Mr. Maydew stood up now and cleared his throat. He had a fine sonorous voice to match his majestic presence.

"May it please Your Honor," he said, "under ordinary conditions this proceeding would mean merely the

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presenting of an uncontested will for probate. But, because of certain prior history in connection with it, I have felt in my bounden duty, as the legal representative of these heirs-at-law, to crave the indulgence of this court whilst I rehearse briefly the admitted facts and file certain sworn and attested statements pertaining to same. I shall endeavor to be brief."

But he didn't in the least suggest a man who intended to be brief. He went on: "As is known to all within the sound of my voice, the Carmichaels at one time formed a large and influential connection in this county; but of late years there remained but one resident member of that sturdy stock, namely, Elijah Carmichael, living at the family homestead three miles from this city on the Concord turnpike. Almost two months ago, on August twenty-first, he peacefully expired at the age of seventy-four. The estate, under the law, descended in equal parts to his surviving next of kin, of whom there proved to be but two — namely, his much younger half-brother, Caleb Carmichael, Esquire, and his niece, Miss Juliet Blair, the only child of decedent's deceased half-sister.

"No difficulty was experienced in finding the junior heir. She is here today." With a sweeping gesture he indicated the girl in his shadow. "But some days passed before the executors succeeded in discovering the whereabouts of the other legal legatee.

"He left here with his parents at the age of eleven years and never once thereafter returned. We trace his career intermittently. We know that as a very young man he studied surgery at a medical college in the city of Philadelphia, but — ahem — never completed his professional education. Thereafter we hear of him under his stage name of Carey Carr, as connected with carnivals, with vaudeville entertainment, with other forms of amusement — in short, a strolling player. It would also appear that some twelve years ago he contracted a matrimonial alliance with a Miss Martha Swopes, originally of Keokuk, Iowa.

"Being at length traced to the city of Houston, Texas, he was informed of the demise of his half-brother and of his own good fortune. Immediately, as he wrote, he made plans for returning here. In that same letter he announced that he would be accompanied by his wife. Needless to add, I refer to this lady who sits at my right.

"Four weeks ago the couple started on their trip hither in their own car. Shortly after leaving Memphis, Tennessee, the husband recalled that their route would take them almost past Reelfoot Lake. Accordingly, he suggested they detour a short distance in order that he might show his wife the scene of his joyous boyhood experiences. His spouse acquiescing, they left the main highway and followed a side road until they reached a gloomy depth known as the Big Hole.

"Our travelers had halted their car upon the low bluff immediately adjacent to this spot and, by the testi-

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mony of the survivor, were standing side by side upon the edge contemplating the somber prospect, when, without warning, the husband staggered, presumably from a cerebral stroke or sudden spasm of faintness, and in the same breath fell forward and was precipitated headfirst into the murky waters below.

"For some time — just how long a time she herself does not recall — his desolated companion remained upon the scene vainly hoping against hope for signs of him. At length, filled with grief and horror, she quit that grim vista, seeking help. In the natural distress of such a moment she accidentally slammed the car door, badly mangling her right thumb, but she drove as best she could to the nearest human habitation some miles away and there gave the alarm. Being assured that days or even weeks must elapse before the remains were borne to the surface, she hurried on to this city.

"At once then it developed that on the eve of their simple wedding twelve years previously, Caleb Carmichael and the then Martha Swopes had entered into certain prenuptial arrangements. Two life insurance policies were taken out, whereby either party was insured for the sum of $5,000 in favor of the other. Likewise each wrote a will identical in its provisions, under the terms of which, in the event of the signer's death, the survivor would become the sole possessor of whatsoever property the decedent might possess at date of death.

"The baring of these facts created new and unexpected factors. Instead of arriving here as a prospective future resident, this lady now appears as her late husband's chosen inheritor and beneficiary, and therefore entitled to that one-half interest in an estate which, had he lived a few days longer, would have been awarded him as a co-heir of his half-brother, Elijah."

Here, for a short but dramatic space, Mr. Maydew paused. Before resuming, he glanced downward at the funereal shape at his side. The widow's somewhat narrow face, with its rather wide but shapely mouth, its deep-set eyes, its firm yet not angular chin, remained a serious, almost austere mask. Only by a fumbling with her right hand at the button fastenings of the light, crepelike coat which she wore over a black silk blouse did she betray any suggestion of inner stress.

From his post at the doorway where he fronted the room, Judge Priest gave an involuntary start — a little start which no one there heeded — and, behind his glasses, his faded blue eyes began squinting hard at something, some motion, some shape, which for him all of a sudden had become overwhelmingly absorbing.

"Meanwhile," resumed the orator, "watch was being maintained at the place of Mr. Caleb Carmichael's untimely taking-off. Eleven days elapsed after that sad event before the body was — ahem — by natural forces projected from its watery entombment. Because of the elements and the inevitable processes of decay and —

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hum, ahem — other causes, the remains had undergone changes melancholy to contemplate.

"Fortunately, however, for our purposes a proper and complete identity was readily established. Not only did the body correspond in general size to the living form of the deceased; not only did the garments still adhering to it answer to the description given by disinterested witnesses at various points as being those worn on his journey northward; but absolutely indisputable proof was found — a removable plate or bridge intended for wear in the lower rear jaw and consisting mainly of three false teeth, which was immediately recognized by its original designer, Dr. P. J. Hooks, of Vicksburg, Mississippi, as being the same which some years ago he made for Caleb Carmichael.

"On such an array of incontrovertible evidence a coroner's jury returned a verdict in accordance with the obvious facts; and, furthermore, the representative of the insurance company, here present, promptly waived any further investigation, and so reported to his home office, with the result that only this morning the widow received a certified check for the full amount of the policy in force on her husband's life at the time of his demise.

"Without further ado, then, the corpse was brought to our fair city and reverently interred in the family vault of the Carmichael family at Elm Grove Cemetery.

"My narrative being practically at an end, I therefore would move the court as follows: First, that the last will and testament of the late Caleb Carmichael be admitted to probate. Second, that the public administrator be instructed to take the necessary steps for a prompt and equitable distribution of the estate of the late Elijah Carmichael to my clients, Mrs. Martha Swopes Carmichael and Miss Juliet Blair. Third, since the junior heir still lacks some three months of attaining her majority, and being in the eyes of the law yet an infant, I move that for the brief space of the interim a guardian for her shall be appointed by this honorable court.

"As a preliminary to such recommendation I now offer for the official transcript sundry documents."

He fumbled in a leather manuscript case and produced quite a sheaf of folded, official-looking papers, together with some cardboard oblongs.

"Among other things, I have here," he said, "a true copy of the birth certificate of Martha Swopes, born at Denver, Colorado, June 18, 1884, together with an attested copy of the marriage license issued to the said Martha Swopes and Caleb Carmichael. I also have here an affidavit recently given by Dr. P. J. Hooks, the previously mentioned dentist of Vicksburg, Mississippi, and with it a transcript of the proceedings of the coroner's jury lately sitting at the nearby city of Fulvin in this state. And finally, I have here the original of the aforesaid will of the late Caleb Carmichael, a will done in the testa-

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tor's handwriting and without the signatures of witnesses, but admissible to probate under our Kentucky statutes, since the body of the text and the signature have been identified as his handwriting by the widow, and likewise by comparison with these several accompanying manuscripts — notes, memoranda, etc. — done in longhand by him, which were found among his personal effects."

Making the items into a compact bundle, Mr. Maydew handed them to the county clerk, who in turn deposited them on the desk before the acting county judge.

"Counsel would appear to have been diligent in behalf of his clients," stated His Honor. "There remains, I take it, only the detail of naming for Miss Juliet Blair, here present, a suitable guardian to protect and conserve her interests, and I therefore —"

The sentence was never finished. From his immediate left there came a choked, gurgling outcry. Major Pitman swung about in his chair.

Judge Priest was swaying in the doorway, his face swollen and convulsed. As half a dozen men sprang toward him, he collapsed face downward on the floor.

They carried him back into his private quarters and laid him on a sofa, and County Court adjourned, with the business before it unfinished. Meanwhile the sufferer had recovered his senses. Somebody naturally had suggested running for a physician. At that the invalid seemed to rally, and in a faint, piping voice spoke out:

"Git Lew Lake," he wheezed. "He looked after me a while back when I had one of these here swoundin' spells." In a lower tone he whispered to his nephew, "And say, son, have somebody telephone out to my house fur Jeff Poindexter, and shoo everybody out of here."

His lids drooped wearily and he lay like one sorely spent as presently Dr. Lake entered, hiding his worriment beneath a manner that was gruff.

"He just went down as though lightning had struck him," began Major Pitman. "It's the first I knew of it, but he says you attended him once before when he had a similar attack."

"He's a liar, then," snorted the old physician. "Billy Priest," he demanded, "what are you up to now, scaring everybody around here half to death?"

Behind him, Major Pitman goggled in astonishment. The invalid was favoring both of them with a slow, crafty wink.

"Uncle Billy, are you all right?" he cried.

"No, I ain't," answered his uncle. "In addition to bein' somewhut shook up, I got an awful hard crack on my elbow ag'inst that hard floor." He lifted his head, then dropped it again. "Air you shore that door is closed? Well, lock it, and pull down both winder curtains yonder. I'm about to set up."

His famous temper bursting out through all his visible pores, Dr. Lake glowered down at his friend. "You

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fraud, what's the meaning of this infernal play-acting?"

"Lew," confessed the malingerer, "I couldn't think of ary other way of breakin' off the proceedin's without creatin' apprehension in certain quarters." He turned his look upon Major Pitman. "About one more minute, son, and you'd have admitted that there will to probate, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, of course — but why —?"

"Well, ez it is, we've got an excuse fur a few days' delay, and ef it should turn out I'm wrong, then the order kin be signed and there's no damage done."

"But what was it you saw or heard that nobody else there could see or hear?" asked the major.

"I ain't absolutely shore I did see anything. You'll have to put your trust in me and lend me some aid, both of you."

"We'll help. But what is it you think you sensed? Fraud — collusion?"

"I ain't mentioned nary one of those harsh terms. I'll give you a hint: Don't it seem likely to you that possibly too much's been took for granted in this here matter?"

"But the insurance investigator looked into everything, remember, and he professed to be entirely satisfied."

"Even so, ef nobody objects, I'll keep broodin', off and on. . . . Listen, son, did it ever occur to you that nobody ain't seen fit to probe very deep into the widow's standin'? Whut I'm tryin' to git at is that the only existin' identification of her is the one which she herself offers."

"How about the certified copy of her birth certificate? Surely you don't think that could be a forgery?"

"I do not. I take it that it's the genuwine article, even though it mout 'a' passed into the hands of, let's say, an impostor. But it dates back forty-odd years."

"Well, then, the marriage license and the two wills — hers and his?"

"Both twelve years old. Whut about sence then?"

"Why, the two photographs."

"Whut two photographs?"

"The two in the file that Maydew tendered a few minutes ago."

"Oh! Fetch 'em in, then, and let's have a look. Better fetch the whole batch in whilst you're about it."

The old man carefully studied the cabinet-sized prints which Major Pitman handed him. He turned them, reading the printed inscriptions on the backs. His scrutiny over, Judge Priest grunted: "Humph! These air indubitably likenesses of the widow. Kinder dressy, not to say stylish in former days, wuzn't she? Plenty of long hair, too, judgin' by the way it's piled up."

"Plenty of long hair yet, unless it's a wig she wears."

"I hardly think it's a wig. I studied her right close't, today. I'd guess offhand that all that there mess of hair is growin' out of her own scalp. . . . Say, son, how did these pictures come to be offered, anyway?"

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"I might make a few inquiries, but, whether she did or not, Maydew approved of it. He said the girl, Juliet Blair, received them in a letter from her aunt-in-law right after word had reached the Caleb Carmichaels down in Texas that Caleb's half-brother was dead and had left him a pile."

"So the girl got them before the drowndin' and not afterwards?"

"Weeks before! The lady said in the letter she looked forward to meeting her little niece by marriage, and in advance wanted to have her see how she looked. So that would seem to dispose of any doubt as to her being what she says she is."

"Seems so. Son, by any chance is that there letter also in Maydew's handy little budget?"

As Major Pitman searched, his senior absent-mindedly slid the two photographs into a breast pocket of his coat.

"I don't find it," said Pitman. "Well, Uncle Billy, are you satisfied that this thing was a false alarm on your part?"

"On the contrary, son, the possible complicatedness of it 'pears to me to be pilin' up thicker'n ever."

"Well, suh, in that case I'm agreeable to doing whatever you want done."

"Here's what I want both of you to do: Randy, I want you to put all these here papers in a secure safe place of keepin' and leave 'em there whilst you're away."

"Away? Where? And why?"

"Away lookin' after your pore old stricken uncle. And right there is where you come into the picture, Lew Lake. It'll be your job to give it out that owin' to my sudden illness, you've ordered me to leave fur a few days' complete rest at Hot Springs, Arkansaw."

"Ah, indeed!" His old comrade's note was sarcastic. "So I'm to perjure myself —"

"You air! Better fix it fur tomorrow mornin' early — the southbound Cannonball out of here. Because tonight at my house I aim to have a confab with little Julie Blair. I'm lookin' to you, boy, to see to it that she gits in and out of my place without anybody bein' the wiser."

"I'll try. How long will we be gone?"

"Not very long, I hope. We'll start off like we wuz headin' fur Hot Springs, but I reckin neither one of us won't actually ever git there."

"But won't Hod Maydew raise Cain about my going away without acting on his application to probate?"

"Let him sweat. Kin he hold it ag'inst you that in the hurry of gittin' off with your venerable and infirm relative you plumb forgot to pass on this motion?"

"But suppose he goes to Judge Dyke out at his house and asks for an order?"

"Poor old Dyke ain't in shape to do any supersedin'. Word I got today is he's out of his head and sinkin' fast. Besides, even ef he did rally, how could they probate a will that's locked up in the old wall-safe of mine yon-

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der, and me the only man who knows the combination?"

"Oh, I see."

"Glad you're beginnin' to — Who's that hammerin' at the door? Must be Jeff. Let him in, but not anybody else. Oh, Randy — " his tone was casual — "how long after them there Germans winged you did it take you to git used to bein' left-handed?"

"I'm not used to it yet. I'm still awkward when it comes to wrestling with things like shirtstuds." The major glanced down at his permanently skewed arm.

"Ah, hah. . . . Well, I s'pose it would take time.". He addressed Dr. Lake: "Say, Lew, how air you on autopsies?"

"I've performed plenty of them in my time, if that's what you mean."

"And whut about little jobs of secret grave-robbin'?"

From the old physician the hot words popped like popcorn: "First, by gum, you ask me to risk my professional reputation by lying. And now you suggest that I begin flirting with the penitentiary —"

"Wait a minute." It was the youngest man breaking in now: "Uncle Billy, what's to hinder you from giving an order for the exhumation of that body?"

"And if I wuz wrong, would Hod Maydew ever git through snickerin'? Think I'd want to be the laughin' stock of the whole district because I'd went off half-cocked?" Judge Priest stood up. "Randy, you better support me on one side and, Jeff, you git on the other. And don't furgit, anybody, that you-all air easin' along a mouty feebled-up wreck of a human shell."

His feet dragging, his hands fumbling weakly, and his head lolling, the invalid traveled down the courthouse steps and on to the rusty car awaiting him at the curbstone. Spectators scattered to spread the latest bulletin: Judge Priest must be awful bad off; he certainly looked it.

He still looked it that evening as he sat, all bundled up, in the front room of his old house out on Clay Street, for his interview with the girl, Juliet Blair. Now here, Judge Priest decided, was a girl not especially bright but sweet and biddable . . . if anything, just a little bit too biddable.

"Was there — is there anything wrong, suh?" she was saying.

"Whut ever made you think that, honey?" he countered.

"Well, Major Pitman slipping me in by the back way. And both of you telling me not to say anything to anybody."

"Oh, that! Well, I'll tell you about that: Your lawyer, Horace Maydew, Esquire, ain't so very friendly towards me. You see, child, I knowed your folks frum who laid the rail. I reckin it wuz largely my fault I didn't keep better track of you after most of your family died off."

"Thank you, suh." She had gracious, simple manners. "Well, you couldn't blame yourself. I haven't lived here since I was a little girl."

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"So I gethered. Whut've you been doin' with yourself?"

"I grew up at Farmdale, out in Bland County, and after Mamma died I managed to finish high school, and then I started clerking in a general store there. I quit when my uncle died and left me this money. I hardly knew him, even."

"Hardly anybody knew him much, without it wuz those two decrepit old servants out on the home place, and one of them deef and dumb besides. You ain't stayin' out there, by any chance?"

"Oh, no, suh! I'm at Mrs. Broderick's boarding house down on Franklin Street."

"Tell me, have you seen very much of this aunt-in-law sence she arrived?"

"Not so very much. She's sort of — sort of standoffish. She never offers to kiss me — just shakes hands."

"I'd gamble there's somebody else would hanker to kiss a purty little trick like you?"

She flushed, and he knew the shot had registered. She hastened to get back on a less intimate track: "She's nice, though. She wrote me an awfully friendly letter before she started for here on the trip that turned out so terribly."

"Is that so? I s'pose you've still got it?"

"No, suh. Almost as soon as we'd met she asked me to give it back to her, along with two pictures of her that she'd sent me at the same time. She said something about it maybe being needed for evidence — something like that. And only yesterday she told me she must have mislaid the letter or lost it, or something."

"Remember anything particular about the writin'?"

"Well, I do remember the letters didn't slant the regular way."

"Sort of backhanded, eh?"

"No, not leaning, exactly — just more straight-up-and-down."

"Well, nearly all of us have our own special little tricks when it comes to takin' pen in hand. And so you're gettin' along fust-rate with this new relative of yours?"

"Just fine, what little I see of her. She stays to herself a lot. But she's mighty considerate — generous, too. Why, Judge Priest, almost the first thing she said to me was that just as soon as this estate was settled up she wanted to take me around the world with her."

"Travel's a great thing. . . . But look here, whut's that sweetheart of yours goin' to say to your traipsin' off like that?"

"Oh, you mean Tom Ackers? I guess I'll know how to handle him."

"I reckin you will. I seem to recall frum my own youth that most good-lookin' young girls 'pear to come by the gift naturally. Say, look here, honey, want to do me a favor?"

"If I can."

"Well, then, promise you won't make any plans about goin' away anywheres until we've had a chance to thresh it all out together. I'm leavin' here early in the mornin', but I don't aim to be gone very long; so, till I git

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back, after that, the bargain stands, eh?"

"Yes, suh, and thank you for your interest. I hope you come back feeling ever so much better."

"Honey," he said with sincerity, "I've got a premonition that practically ez soon ez I git away, I'm goin' to start feelin' and actin' a heap stronger. Jest seein' you has holpen me a lot."

Judge Priest proved himself a true prophet. For, while he still swayed like a dizzy pachyderm as Major Pitman and Jeff Poindexter eased him aboard the southbound flier in the before-sunup gloom of that next morning, he regained a measure of his customary spryness almost immediately after he got off two hours later at a junction town which straddled the state line. Major Pitman stayed aboard. He went on to New Orleans and changed cars there for Houston.

Since the judge was known to people nearly everywhere in that end of the state, he made himself shrinking and inconspicuous in the shadow of a freight shed until Jeff, having gone up the street, presently came back with a hired livery rig.

For most of the forenoon the convalescent and Jeff jogged through the gloriously tinted woods. Before noon, they stopped at a double log cabin, where the old man was immediately in confab with a bewhiskered lowlander. This person's tongue was as nimble as his bodily movements were slow.

"Yas, suh," he stated. "That day of the drowndin', I seen this here couple lumber past here. I wuz settin' yonder, and I noticed they wuz totin' a terrible big load of plunder with 'em."

"About whut time of day wuz that?"

"I kin fix it mighty nigh to the minute. Uncle Gippy Saunders, that drives the free delivery route, wuz just comin' in sight, and, rain or shine, he's due past here at two-twelve. . . . Well, I jest set here, and about four-fifteen their car came humpin' back."

"Whut makes you sure it wuz around four o'clock?"

"I got you ag'in there, suh. My chillen wuz jest climbin' over the yard fence, comin' from school; and school lets out at four and it takes 'em a skimpy quarter of an hour to git home, cuttin' acrost lots. . . . So the car come along — jest the woman in it now — and she stopped right about where you air now, and yelled out kind of shrill. One end of one thumb wuz mashed mighty nigh to a pulp, seemed like. She says she's lookin' fur help on account of her husband gittin' hisse'f drownded."

"Jest a second: How fur is the lake frum here?"

"Not more'n two long miles — mebbe a quarter further on to the Big Hole."

"About how long would it take the average car to drive frum here to there and back ag'in to here?"

"Thirty minutes at the most."

"Did she mention how soon it wuz

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after they got to the lake before the drownin' took place?"

"Right away, she said. So right off I ast her whut she'd been doin' all the meantime, and she said she wuz so upset and excited she couldn't rightly say. Well, she'd cammed down considerable by the time she got back here with the sorry news. I'll say that fur the lady."

"Quite so. And whut did you do?"

"Well, fust off I set my biggest boy and my least one on mules and sent 'em to git fellers started draggin' the Big Hole. And then I climbed in 'longside her and showed her the way to old Doc Townsend's. And I left her there, and when I got back it wuz comin' on dark."

"So you didn't see her after that?"

"Not a minute frum that hour to this." To the languid speaker came an idea: "Say, mister, whut-all interest have you got in this here matter?"

"I'm a lawyer by profession," explained Judge Priest.

"I see. I heard tell there wuz a heap of money involved. Say, that there pair shore traveled with a big store of bag and baggin', ez the feller sez. Besides bundles and gripsacks and two kinds of little squeezed-in trunks, hitched on the runnin' boards, the whole back end of that kivered car wuz loaded halfway to the roof. I remember a couple of these here leather boxes like you'd carry brass-band horns in, and cramped in down at the bottom-like wuz about the biggest one of these here bull-fiddle cases ever I seen in my life."

"You didn't handle this bass-fiddle case — shiftin' the load, say?"

"No, suh. Why, all lamed up like she wuz and all bloody, and her havin' jest lost a husband, she even stopped long enough to lock up that there car before we went into Doc Townsend's."

"It's been long years since I wuz down at that Big Hole of yours," Judge Priest said, making his tone casual. "But, ez I recall, the ridge makes out to a kind of edge and then drops off steep and there's heavy undergrowth except just below the bluff? I don't suppose anybody studied the tracks at the spot where it happened — tire marks and footprints and sich?"

"Why would they? The whole place wuz all trompled down by the time I got there next mornin'."

Dr. Townsend wore on his vest lapel the little button of the United Confederate Veterans. Judge Priest owned such a button, too, and took occasion so to state, introducing himself. Yes, Dr. Townsend had dressed the widow's wound. The bone was not seriously injured; some flesh and a lot of skin missing. "It ought to be healed up by now," he went on, "unless there was infection or the patient's blood was in poor shape."

"Well, much obliged and I reckin I'd better be on my way," said Judge Priest.

Back again late that night at the railroad, Judge Priest did some telephoning to Major Pitman, en route,

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and to Dr. Lake at the latter's residence. Here he parted from Jeff. He caught one train and was on his way farther south, and Jeff caught another going in the opposite direction. Next morning the home town was excited to hear that after years of intimate association as master and man, Judge Priest and Jeff had severed relationship.

"Naw, suhs, they wuzn't to say no hard feelin's," Jeff explained. "In fact, jest before we severed ourselves frum one 'nuther, the old Boss Man gimme a note of utmost recommendation to Mister Attorney Floyd Fairleigh, an' I'm done already gone to work fur him at his country residence out here on the Lone Oak road. . . . Naw, suhs, no complaint on neither side. I reckins you mout say both of us at once't jest seemed to lose our taste fur one nurr."

At Vicksburg on the following forenoon Judge Priest called upon that Dr. Hooks who once upon a time had made a removable bridge for the lower right jaw of one Caleb Carmichael. He had a drawing in his files of the bridgework.

The Judge's next stop was across the big river over at the thriving Louisiana city of Monroe. Here he visited the establishment of a photographer named Newton who, it seemed, had succeeded another photographer named Hunt, now deceased. It was the facsimile signature of this defunct Mr. Hunt that was printed on these two photographs which Judge Priest had pilfered from the budget of exhibits tendered in evidence.

"Naturally I wouldn't recall this female," said Mr. Newton. "I didn't take over the shop until after Hunt died. But this is his work: I'd recognize it anywhere. Let me look through Hunt's old accounts.

"Here you are," he said at length. "The books show sittings on June 11th, eleven years back, and delivery of three dozen printed pictures four days later, billed at theatrical rates. They were billed to Carey Carr, care of the Lily DeWitt Carnival Company. Oh, yes, and here's records of two re-orders mailed to other points — one to Spokane, Washington, and the other to Gallipolis, Ohio. Who was this Carey Carr?"

"His stage name wuz Carr. His right name wuz Caleb Carmichael," explained Judge Priest.

He reclaimed the photographs and went away. Still mulling things over, Judge Priest strolled aimlessly, and presently he came to, standing on the shore of the Ouachita River, which runs through Monroe, and he looked down and saw a large craft, part barge and part steamer, which, with floating flags and brilliant lettering on its flanks, proclaimed itself as the Rice & Pease Aquatic Palace.

"Now, by gum, why didn't I think of that before!" exclaimed Judge Priest.

With a sort of ponderous alacrity he labored down the bank and entered the gay marquee which arched a hospitable gangplank. Judge Priest

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picked out a tall, spry person who unmistakably had about him the executive manner, and who proved to be cordial.

"The name is Rice," he stated, speaking past the slant of a tremendous cigar. "Better known amongst friends and well-wishers as Lengthy Bill Rice. How can I serve you?"

"I'm not absolutely sure you can," said Judge Priest, who had thought it expedient to drop the vernacular which ordinarily he employed. "I just wanted to ask you a few leading questions. I take it, then, that you are widely acquainted in this field — that is, with individuals?"

"Listen, oldtimer, there are more guys in this racket owing me borrowed money than the census enumerator ever meets. Come on in inside and set down."

The pair of them spent half an hour together, very pleasantly, and, on the older man's side, not entirely without profit. At any rate, he decided progress had been made along a previously undeveloped ore-streak. That night he wired an advertisement to a weekly magazine published in Cincinnati and devoted to amusement in all its branches, for insertion in its next issue. Then, feeling better content with prospects than he had since arriving in Monroe, he overflowed a berth on a railroad train bound for New Orleans.

In his new job, and right from the outset, Jeff Poindexter appeared to have an abundance of leisure. His very first afternoon of service under Mr. Floyd Fairleigh he went rabbit hunting. His route took him across the fields stretching from the Fairleigh place towards a road half a mile or so to the southward.

Perhaps an hour later he halted at a party line of barbed wire which marked a neighboring ownership. Two dead bunnies swung by their tethered hind legs from a convenient trouser button. He had emerged from the heavy covert almost directly behind the gaunt old homestead where the late Elijah Carmichael had lived out his solitary days and where now his half-brother's widow was domiciled. Somewhat nearer to him were the dependencies — an old but stout brick smokehouse, a springhouse, obviously abandoned; a mule barn, a stable, a cowshed, now serving as a garage; and, back of the inner yard fence, one log cabin, the lone survivor of what, once upon an ante bellum time, had been a whole row of slave quarters.

From the shelter of a clump of sassafras bushes Jeff studied what lay before him. The "big house" was tightly shuttered. Just beyond the cabin a very old, very feeble colored man was slashing at a log of firewood. A large, tawny dog was lying at the edge of the chopping place.

Quite slowly, Jeff slipped between two of the rusted strands. Instantly the dog was up and coming at him.

Jeff neither retreated nor threatened. He stood in his tracks, making small soothing, clucking sounds. Puz-

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zled by these tactics, the dog hesitated, slowed down. Moving very deliberately, Jeff produced from a vest pocket a bit of paring from a horse's hoof. He dropped this odorous offering by his foot and the dog mouthed at it, licked the morsel enthusiastically. Next Jeff sat down on a handy stump, got out his knife, and deliberately skinned and beheaded one of his rabbits, then dismembered the cadaver and fed the gobbets of hot meat to the dog. He took his time about it. When the last delectable chunk had vanished, the dog was nuzzling Jeff's hand, making low rumblings in his chest, getting the smell of Jeff's garments in his nostrils.

The dog trailing at his heels, Jeff dawdled across the lot. When at length the ancient darky saw him, Jeff smiled and by signs made clear his intent. He took the ax from those uncertain hands and made the chips fly, the dog looking on approvingly. Presently a Negro woman came forth from the kitchen wing. At sight of Jeff she stopped abruptly.

"Whut you doin' yere, boy?"

"Mizz Hester Morgan, ain't it?" asked Jeff, removing his cap.

"Ef 'tis, den whut?"

"Wellum, I works at Mist' Fairleigh's on the next place adjoinin'. So I jest dropped by to say howdy."

"Huh! We ain't havin' no truck wid neighbors."

"Yessum, but I'm same ez home folks. Many's the time I heared my ole mammy mention you — Libby Poindexter, she wuz."

"I knowed Sist' Poindexter. Dat any reason why I got to know you?"

"No'm, not widout you'd keer to, ven'able lady. But I wuz jist thinkin' to myself 'at mebbe you-all might accept this yere molly har' w'ich I kilt it few minutes ago, ez a free-will offerin', sort of."

"Lemme look." Her practiced fingers dug into the yielding tissues. "Feel lak he all kidney-fatted, don't he?" she said. Her tone was mollified.

"Lemme clean him fur you, Aunt Hester. Fust, tho', lemme git a few mo' sticks of stove-wood laid by."

"That ain't a bad idea, neither," she said. "Suttin'ly is a heap of logs needed 'round yere someway. . . . Well, Br'er Poindexter, when you gits th'ough, better come on in our house an' set a spell."

It was good and dark when Jeff went home across lots. He had asked no definite questions, had been most casual, had betrayed no unseemly curiosity. Yet he knew more about the ways of that house under its present regime and about the new mistress of it than another investigator could have gleaned in a month of Sundays. He knew what went on in and about the old Carmichael place by day. He didn't know — yet — what went on in and about it by night, because it would appear that when Aunt Hester and the deaf-mute retired they retired for keeps and for sleeping purposes.

Best of all, Jeff knew that thereafter he could invade these premises at any hour and be assured of a hos-

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pitable reception by Aunt Hester's dog.

There was a nipping edge on the October air and the young moon that rode in the pale sky looked cold and crumbly. It was getting on toward midnight, moreover — the dread hour when graveyards are, on the best authority, said to yawn.

Jeff Poindexter shivered and bit hard with his underjaw to keep his teeth from chattering. He was stretched out, face downward, on the sloped roof of a latticed side porch at one corner of the old Carmichael homestead. He was looking into the bedroom of the solitary tenant of that house, a room at the eastern end of the building on the second floor. Through the slats of a wooden blind he watched the figure within. Dressed in a house wrapper, it sat at a dressing table not ten feet from him.

While he watched, the occupant stripped from her wounded hand the bandages which encased it, revealing to him a wound which looked very raw and angry. From a medicinal-looking tube she squeezed a little wormlike ribbon of some pasty material and anointed the injured thumb, then rewrapped it with a new strip of gauze and slipped on a rubber thumb guard.

This done, she combed out her hair, strand by strand, until it hung in a thick, dark mane upon her shoulders, and then doused it from a tall, slender bottle which to Jeff suggested barber-shop tonics.

At length she was done with these purely personal services. She gathered together the articles she had been using and restored them to a leather toilet case. Then she fastened the toilet kit, using a small key.

Now she got up and passed out of Jeff's limited range of vision. Almost immediately, though, she came back into sight. Carrying an old-fashioned lantern, unlit, she passed through a door.

Instantly Jeff was back-scuffling over the eaves of that porch. His toes found purchase in the latticework and very quickly he was on the earth — so quickly, in fact, that when the woman's form emerged from a rear doorway, downstairs, Jeff was already crouched behind a jog in the kitchen wall not twenty feet distant.

She crossed the dooryard. At the wood-pile she gathered up an armload of fireplace lengths, and then she went directly into the squat old smokehouse. Jeff, harkening, heard a dimmed wooden clatter which he took to mean the smokehouse had been barred from within.

At once, through the customary draft vents up under the overhang of the gabled roof, there showed dimmed patches of light, to prove that the occupant had set the wick of her lantern to burning, and then wisps of smoke began oozing out of those chinks.

Stealthily, step by step, Jeff executed a flanking advance upon that smokehouse. At the back of it a second-growth oak tree almost touched it. Jeff silently hoisted himself until

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he was poised in the main crotch. At that elevation, a line of orifices, like so many minute portholes, were only slightly above the level of his eyes. Since he could not turn his gaze downward, there would be nothing to see except blackened rafters. But, by craning his neck and standing tiptoe, he could sniff in. This he did, drawing his head back before the escaping smoke rifts made him cough.

With watering eyes and a gasping throat he repeated the motion. Already those inquisitive nostrils of his had recorded the first smell to gush forth — the honest smell of dry hickory ablaze. But presently with it was mingled an acrid, varnishy taint which stung his nose membranes. He softly snorted out this evil fume and, with his face turned aside, waited until the volume of it had lessened.

Well, one thing was certain. The lady must be fairly suffocated by now. Any minute now she would have to come out for breath. But before he departed Jeff took one more whiff.

He turned cold and rigid, and the flesh crawled on the nape of his neck. Was an overcharged imagination playing tricks on him or did he catch a different and an identifiable reek? . . . It wasn't imagination. The new odor grew heavier, more definite, more unmistakably what it was.

Jeff slid down to solid, friendly ground and streaked away from there.

Uncle and nephew sat over Creole coffee in a restaurant on the French side of Canal Street.

"Well, that's that, Uncle Billy. By all accounts, the pair of them kept closely under cover all the four months they were in Houston — lived behind closed doors in a rented bungalow on a back street. I couldn't find anybody in the vicinity who'd so much as seen Carmichael. A few neighbors did catch semi-occasional glimpses of the wife — vaguely described as being rather tall for a woman, not too stout, not too thin, quietly dressed, and with no particularly distinguishing marks.

"But, as I was just telling you, I think I found out why they were lying so low — or, rather, why he was. About a month after these two landed in town, the police department out at Seattle asked the police department of Houston to locate, if possible, one Caleb Carmichael, better known as Carey Carr, and sometimes known, it would seem, as Dr. Cicero Carter, which is an alias we never knew about before, eh? So I had a discreet talk with the Houston chief of detectives — mighty fine, intelligent fellow. He said he notified Seattle he had the party in question spotted, and what about it? The answer back was that in case of certain contingencies Seattle might want an arrest made, but that until further notice nothing was to be done at the Texas end, except to keep a weather eye on the man. The next thing the Houston authorities knew the couple had pulled out, bag and baggage."

"And also with at least two tootin' horns and seemin'ly about the most

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majestic bull-fiddle case on record," supplemented Judge Priest.

"Well, anyway," went on Major Pitman, "inside of a week later, or some such matter, the local papers printed a press dispatch saying that Caleb Carmichael, while on his way to his former home in Kentucky, had been accidentally drowned. Just to be on the safe side and show they weren't overlooking any bets, the Houston force wired Seattle, and in reply promptly received word that the police out there had also read the same dispatch and, the person being dead, that the incident was closed. I took down the name of the Seattle chief in case you'd care to communicate with him."

"I think, son, I've got a better notion than that. That time I wuz out in Denver, Colorado, attendin' the Bar Association meetin', I met up with a powerfully clever lawyer from Seattle — he stands high out there. I'll send him one of these here night lettergrams, askin' him to make a few inquiries in the proper quarter and lemme know the results ez soon ez possible."

"Well, suh, what's the next move?"

"Well, you better go ahead and light a shuck fur God's country. Ef Hod Maydew should git impatient to have that there will probated, you can't do nothin' because your absent-minded old uncle went away sick, leavin' the will locked up in his safe, and nobody except him knows the combination. That'll give us a leeway of ez many days ez we'll probably need — and mebbe we won't need many more unless I should have to take a quick trip in the general direction of the South Atlantic seaboard."

At that Major Pitman's eyebrows rose so high they almost merged with his scalp line. Judge Priest chuckled.

"Sort of jolted you, didn't I, boy? Well, detective work seems to call fur more travelin' than I figgered on. But I'll say one thing fur it: You come in contact with some mighty prominent and influential people. F'rinstance, now, I bet you never knew anything a-tall about the career and achievements of Mr. Lengthy Bill Rice, a mighty genteel gentleman, even ef he does talk a curious kind of lingo. And I'll bet you further that ontil now the lifework of Mr. A. A. Slupsky, better known to countless thousands as Appetite Albert, has been to you like a sealed book. I wuz entertained by the first-named celebrity up at Monroe in this state, and am indebted to him fur several helpful suggestions."

"Helpful in connection with what?" demanded the amazed major.

"Why, helpful in connection with findin' the present earthly whereabouts, ef any sich there be, of the venerable and almost equally distinguished Mr. Appetite Albert. Here's the way I'm fixin' to go about it."

From a capacious side pocket he extracted a folded copy of a bulky periodical.

"This," he expounded, "is called the *Three-Sheet*. They call it the

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trouper's Bible. Well, the grand special souvernir fall-openings edition, due to be on all newsstands everywhere tomorrow, will contain an advertisement requesting that if same comes to the attention of Mr. Appetite Albert or anybody else who might know his present earthly habitation, ef any, a great favor will be conferred by telegraphin' collect to Lemuel K. Jones, care Room 874, Hotel Beauregard, this city."

"But who in thunder is Lemuel K. Jones?"

"Oh, that'll be me. I always did think Lemuel wuz a stylish name."

"Quite so!" said the nephew with irony. "You make everything just as clear as mud. And when you find Mr. Appetite Albert, what then?"

"Why, then I'll either crave leave to call on him or, in case he's passed away, git permission to examine his amassed collection of rare printed matter. He wuz the outstandin' pitchman of his day, specializin' mainly in slum and physic. But he wuz equally eminent in two other departments. He could swallow anything he fancied in any given quantity, and his other hold on immortal fame wuz based on these proud but truthful boasts of his: First, that durin' half a century and more he had met everybody that had ever figgered in the entertainment world; and furthermore it seemed that, havin' once met sich parties or even heard of 'em, he rarely ever forgot the facts; but, ef he did, could refresh his memory frum a monumental assortment of showbills, pictures, press notices, clippin's, obituary notices, programs, et cetera, et cetera, which he gethered up ez he went along and sorted away in a sort of filin' system of his own."

"At last I begin to get a little gleam," said Major Pitman. "Through this notable personage you hope to trace the professional life of somebody, presumably Caleb Carmichael and his wife, Martha Swopes Carmichael — is that it?"

"Purcisely that. So you see why I've got to hang around here long enough fur Lemuel K. Jones to git some results from his advertisin' campaign. Say, Ranny, you've jest about got time to ketch the flier fur home, ef you hurry."

Those times, long-distance telephoning was more of an undertaking than afterwards it became, but, once Major Pitman was on the right trail, he very promptly succeeded in getting through to his truant kinsman. From the city of Richmond, Va., no less, there came over the wire a familiar treble saying: "Well, son, how's tricks?"

"Not so good. Hod Maydew kept pestering me about that will business. Day before yesterday, to prove how helpless I was, I took him into your chambers over at the courthouse and showed him that old iron safe of yours. He gave the knobs a turn and she opened out like a split watermelon. Uncle Billy, it had been standing there unlocked all this time!"

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"I had a fretful feelin' that I furgot something," lamented the old man. "Well, that's too bad. But it mout be wuss."

"It is worse, a whole lot worse. You know what he did?"

"Whut?"

"Did just what you'd expect a resourceful chap like Maydew would do: Put out for County Judge Dyke's house; he'd rallied a little and was semiconscious. And the poor old dying chap signed the necessary orders, admitting that will to probate and, on top of that, named the widow as the guardian of the girl."

"Whew! When did you say all this happened?"

"I didn't say. But it was Monday afternoon."

"And this is Wednesday. Why —?"

"I've been trying to locate you, but you left a twisting trail — and no forwarding addresses to speak of. Anyhow, they're moving fast, that outfit. I understand the estate is practically divided up. And only a little while ago I heard that the homestead, which belongs to the two of them jointly, has been put on the market for a quick sale."

"Well, I hate to leave here right this minute, but I'd better finish up my recuperatin' at home. I can't hardly git there, though, before early day after tomorrow mornin'. You git aholt of Lew Lake right away and tell him to go ahead with a certain clandestine undertakin' — tonight, ef it ain't too late, or anyhow not later than tomorrow night. And say, son, has any answer come yit to that wire of mine to Seattle?"

"A fat envelope arrived this evening — special delivery and marked 'Special and urgent.' Shall I open it?"

"No, hold it till I git there."

"How have you fared with your hunt for — what's his name? — the gentleman with the appetite and the scrapbooks?"

"Jest so-so. He's gone to a better world than Virginia, even. I'm goin' through his cluttered and unindexed earthly assets at the place where he passed on frum. It's no easy task. Any private communications frum Jeff?"

"Not a breath. I'm in touch with him, but even if he had anything to tell he wouldn't tell it to anybody except you."

"I reckin that's true. Well, I better be seein' about train connections at Louieville, dadgum it!"

On the second morning thereafter Major Pitman got up before the stars blinked out to greet his errant uncle. At the station Jeff Poindexter was lurking discreetly in some dark shadows. He revealed himself, handed his former employer a smallish parcel, and in the shelter of the major's car made a whispered brief report, then expeditiously vanished across the tracks. Major Pitman had with him the letter postmarked Seattle. For the moment the old man pocketed it.

"What's the latest tidin's?" he demanded as they headed for Clay Street.

"Well, Dr. Lake pulled off that surreptitious job of grave-robbing late

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last night—early this morning, rather. Sheriff Birdsong cooperated, just as you arranged for before you left here. Dr. Lake telephoned that he'd be at your house at eight o'clock to let you know the results."

"That ain't so long to wait. And gives us time to git some needed nourishment down inside ourselves."

"How about the Richmond business?"

"Havin' to pull out so sudden left things kind of snarled up. I found some scattered bits of fairly informative printed matter. But there's one break in the chain, and that's whut I'm still hopin' may turn up. Ef it should come to light I'm to expect a wire right off, givin' full purticulars, regardless of expense. . . ."

The pair were still at the table when Dr. Lake stumped in. "Anybody liable to hear us?" he asked.

"Excusin' us, there's nobody on the place exceptin' Aunt Dilsey, and she's out in the kitchen," stated his host.

"All right, then, pour me a cup of coffee, Major. . . . Well, there was no need for anything resembling a regular autopsy. I did what there was to be done right there in the vault by flashlight, and then we resealed the box and came away."

"Well?" Judge Priest's voice was higher-pitched than usual.

"Billy Priest," went on Dr. Lake, "I don't know whose body is in that coffin, but I'll swear it's not the body of the party whose name is engraved on the coffin plate."

Major Pitman whistled.

Dr. Lake said, "The face was mauled up past recognition, and the hands are mutilated, too, and the scalp. But that wasn't due to decomposition while the body was under water. It must have been done beforehand — done deliberately, I'd say."

"How about the teeth?"

"Just coming to that. While there was a gap in the lower jaw where three teeth had been pulled out, I'm dead sure those teeth were drawn after death. In short, gentlemen, I'm ready to risk my professional reputation that this body cannot be the body of Caleb Carmichael for the simple reason that it's a substituted body which had been subjected to chemical preservatives long before it was dumped in that lake. Well, what's next?"

Judge Priest got ponderously up. "The next thing," he said, "is fur you two gentlemen to give me your best opinions on a few little bits of physical evidence."

In the living-room the old judge first invited the attention of his colleagues to certain time-yellowed clippings, including in his budget a creased play-program and some rumpled lithographs.

"Kind of keep track of the dates on the margins of these," he said, passing them out, one by one. "They're s'posed to run consecutively, up to the p'int where the record breaks off."

When this had been done, he said, "Next we've got this here very illuminatin' communication frum my friend, Judge Frobisher out in Seattle. I'll read it aloud."

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His reading was punctuated by appreciative grunts from Dr. Lake and once from Major Pitman an exclamation.

"And now, boys, we come to the contributions of a most competent individual and one that I'm shorely proud of," continued Judge Priest. He removed the loosened wrappings on the parcel which Jeff Poindexter had bestowed upon him at the station. His blunt fingers plucked forth a partly unreeled length of ordinary surgical gauze. It was slightly stained with some greasy substance and by its spiraling betrayed that it had lately served as a bandage.

"Lew," he said, "look at this, please, and take a few sniffs, and then give us your expert opinion ez to its character and the uses to which it's been put?"

"One sniff is ample," stated Dr. Lake, "and one glance is sufficient. The way it's still kinked up shows it was recently snugly wrapped around some small member — a finger or possibly a big toe."

"How about a thumb?" prompted Judge Priest.

"Or a thumb!" agreed Dr. Lake, and slapped his knee understandingly.

"And the stuff that wuz smeared on it — would that be good to cure up a sore thumb?"

"I should say not! That's phenolate; it would delay the normal healing processes. But why —?"

"Never mind the whys and wherefores. Let's pass along to Exhibit B."

Gently he fished out and passed to his crony a tiny wisp of hairs, curling a little at their lower tips and of an average length of about eighteen inches.

"That's easy," said Dr. Lake. "What we've got here is a few combings from a human scalp. The length would indicate they grew on a woman's head. They're lighter at the roots than anywhere else. That shows dye had been used to turn a naturally sandy color into a very dark brown. I can guess where they came from, too."

"And your fust guess will be the right one," assented Judge Priest. "Out of the head of the Widder Carmichael."

"Then why all this pother about a strand of topknot? It may be foolish — and vain — for a woman to dye her hair, but I never heard it was any crime."

"No crime, but mebbe it wuzn't so foolish, neither. And here's some little souvenirs fur you to scrutinize."

For their inspection he tendered three minute and irregular splinters of thin wood. In turn his companions fingered these fragments, rubbed them, bent them, smelled them; then, after conferring briefly, nodded to each other.

"We're agreed here, Uncle Billy." The major was spokesman. "It's fairly simple. These are scraps of a very light but strong wood, possibly used as a casing of some sort, possibly as a veneer that was stretched over a heavier framework. Originally they were painted black and shellacked.

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Recently an effort was made to destroy them by burning, or else they were burned accidentally."

"Checks with my diagnosis," confirmed Dr. Lake. "There's traces of the polish still adhering to this one. And here's a crumb of glue — old glue, at that. All of which being conceded, what about it?"

"Hold your hosses! Before we git through I think that even without a chemical analysis it kin be demonstrated that these here specimens air overlooked salvage frum an article which fust wuz busted into scrap and then the wreckage burnt up piecemeal — in short, a bull-fiddle case of augmented purportions."

"But look here, Uncle Billy," protested Major Pitman, "aren't these bass-fiddle cases usually made of some light, stout composition, to save weight and all?"

"Nowadays, yes. But former years they made 'em of wood."

"Where'd these specimens come from? Or is that one of your secrets, too?"

"You'd have to know to understand some other disclosures that'll follow. They came off the earthen floor of the smokehouse out on the Carmichael place. To git 'em Jeff Poindexter had to pick a padlock. Once't he wuz inside, he gathered up a lot of fresh wood ashes and dead embers and some old dirt, and sifted it all out keerfully and got these here results."

Judge Priest lowered himself into a rustic rocker and, with maddening deliberation, relit his corncob pipe.

"Now, then," he said, between puffs, "let's go back to beginnin's: Lew, you'll bear me out when I say that, jedgin' by whut word trickled back here frum time to time, after he'd left here ez a youngster, Caleb Carmichael must've been a bad egg all along. At Philadelphia, where he studied medicine, he got mixed up in some kind of funny business and left there without ever gittin' his degree.

"Well, after bein' kicked out of college he takes up play-actin' and music and sich. Then there comes a kind of gap in his theatrical record. Shortly after, though, ez we kin figger by that letter from our informant, Judge Frobisher, out in Seattle, he branched out to include fortune-tellin' and spiritualism: and, under the name of 'Doctor' Cicero Carter, also doin' a little malpractice on the side.

"In the course of his ramblin's he marries Martha Swopes, of Keokuk, Ioway.

"Now, we begin to git definite track of him ag'in. Four months ago, at Seattle, he branched out frum his other dubious callin's fur long enough to perform an illegal operation on a young girl. She dies under his hands on the operatin' table. Because the girl's folks want to protect her good name, the thing's hushed up, someway. But he skips out and heads fur Texas. I reckin he's more or less disguised, but, to be on the safe side, he goes to usin' his right name once more. Well, back in Seattle, talk starts. So the police there trace Carmichael. They locate him in his snug

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little retreat at Houston and, ez a precaution, ask the Houston authorities to sort of keep an eye on him.

"Then all of a sudden he gits word that his half-brother, Elijah, has passed on up here in this county and left him a right sizable chunk of ready cash and some other odds and ends of property. With money in his possession, that Seattle family air liable, not only to tie up his share of the estate and sue him fur causin' their child's death, but likewise press a criminal charge and have him extradited out there fur trial.

"Well, there he is! Whut good is all that legacy goin' to do him ef he loses it in a damage suit and, on top of that, gits stuck into prison in the State of Washington fur mebbe a long term? There's one way out, though. There's that there will he wrote years and years before, leavin' everything he owned to his wife. Ef he's declared legally dead the money is still on tap, because his wife gits it.

"So he gits busy. Whilst he's pretendin' to be settlin' up his affairs in Houston, he's really stirrin' his stumps to set a clever scheme in motion. Frum somebody he buys the preserved body of some poor pauper answerin' roughly to his own gin'ral plans and specifications. So he smuggles that body into his house. And he pries the jaws open and he pulls three teeth out of the lower jaw on the right-hand side, and he slips into the gap his own bridgework. Lackin' all else, and with only a superficial examination of the mouth, which is whut he's countin' on, he's provided about the best identification that anybody could ast fur.

"Here's where the bull-fiddle case comes into the picture. Let's say it's a memento of his old barnstormin' days that he's hung on to fur all these years. He gits rid of the fiddle that's in it, and into that case, by main strength, he jams that friendless unknown's body. And he loads it into his car, and him and his wife start out drivin' through to Kintucky.

"So they come skyhootin' acrost country with that cased-up corpse ridin' behind 'em. Just after they cross the state line from Tennessee into this state they turn off the main road, and he drops over to the most lonesome corner in that lonesome upper tip of Reelfoot; to the Big Hole, where all them curious eddies air.

"Well, no sooner do they git there than things start happenin'. He drags the body out of the fiddle case. He messes up the face so it'll be unrecognizable. He dresses it up in the clothes he's been wearin' apurpose all durin' the trip — clothes that hotel clerks and camp-ground people and service-station people along the line have seen him wearin'. He dumps the camouflaged body into the Big Hole, where he's reasonably shore those strange underwater currents will hold it fur a few days anyhow before it comes to the surface. He dresses himself up in clothes that, with any kind of luck, will keep him frum bein' recognized ez the individual he really is. And, right then and there, Caleb Car-

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michael, alias Carey Carr, alias Dr. Cicero Carter, vanishes out of the scene.

"Now let's take up the widder's end of it. Him havin' faded frum mortal view, she takes the center of the stage. With her mashed thumb bleedin' all over her, she comes bustin' out of those bottums, spreadin' the alarm. She gits her wound patched up and then drives on through here alone, to take possession of the old home place. Ez a bereft woman, she stays in seclusion there till the dissectin'-room body is recovered and identified ez her late husband's remains, and then she sets out to prove up her right to inherit his sheer in the estate."

"Well, I'll be darned!" exclaimed Dr. Lake fervently. "The next step's clearly enough indicated, eh?"

"I don't know about that," said Judge Priest.

"Then what are you going to do?" demanded his friend.

"Jest set a spell, and mebbe in the meantime try to gether up a few little odds and ends that seem to be flappin' loose."

"But, man alive, if your sequence or theories will stand the test — and I can't see a flaw in it anywhere — there has been deliberate collusion to bolster up a crooked conspiracy."

"Concedin' you're right, whut would you advise doing?"

"What is there to do except grab the woman forthwith? Stick her in jail. Keep her there till she's ready to confess where her husband's hidden away. Then indict 'em both. Send 'em both to the penitentiary. Good riddance to bad rubbish!"

"Jest a minute, Lew. Admittin' there's been a heap of provable and self-evident skulduggery practiced in this here affair, even so, that's a perfectly good will that wuz offered fur probate — and probated — by the bereft lady's lawyer, wuzn't it? Ef he's alive he's still entitled to his fifty per cent in his half-brother's estate, ain't he? I'd trust Hod Maydew to git him and her both out of sich a mess with nothin' lost exceptin' a couple of reputations and mebbe a few tail-feathers fur attorney's fees. Ef, on the other hand, a human bein' has been deliberately made away with —"

"But you just now said —!" Dr. Lake straightened himself with a sudden jerk. "By heavens, Billy Priest, are you intimating there's been foul play?"

"Don't go jumpin' at hasty conclusions. For the moment let's all remain ca'm, cool, and collected."

"But if you think what you seem to be thinking, if you've got suspicions of a killing at the back of your mind, there certainly are steps to be taken."

"There certainly air. I kin think of three steps already. The first step is fur you to put a tight clamp on them waggin' jaws of yours and go start your mornin' round amongst your patients, ef any such survivin' unfortunates there be. And the second step is fur you, Ranny, to pick your time fur it some time today and find little Juliet Blair and toll her here, unbeknown to anybody else, fur a little

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chat. And the third step is fur me to set right where I am and hope and pray I'll be hearin' frum Richmond betwixt now and dark. It'll be word frum there that ought to be the key to unlock the darkest closet yit."

It was getting on toward one thirty o'clock in the afternoon when Major Pitman, a deepening concern on his face, burst in on Judge Priest who, seeing that look, sat up abruptly. "Where's the girl?" he demanded sharply.

"She's gone, and the woman with her!"

"Where?"

"That's what I'm not dead sure of yet. But, wherever it is, they're both well on their way."

Judge Priest was on his feet now, mopping at his slick forehead. "While we sat here clackin' away like three old guinea hens!" he shrilled. "Go on, go on!" he ordered. "Tell me whutall you know."

"I should have gone to Mrs. Broderick's boarding house as soon as I left here this morning, but you said there was no rush, so I put in a few licks at my office first. About an hour ago my secretary came back from having a snack and told me that over at the soda fountain she'd just heard a curious rumor from her sister, who works at the bank — something that had to do with Juliet Blair and Mrs. Carmichael.

"Inside of three minutes I was in the private office of the bank, giving Walter Ricketts a quick third-degree. He said that about two forty-five o'clock day before yesterday afternoon, the two of them came in there together, and the woman withdrew her share of the money on deposit to her account, and then, in her capacity as guardian, authorized the withdrawal of the girl's half of the funds — roughly, a total of $18,200. Well, he tried to tell them how risky it was for two females to be carrying around that much money in cash, especially as they'd already told him they expected to leave almost immediately on an extensive sea voyage. He argued, but she stood firm. He had to scrape his vaults pretty scarce of big bills to make up a sum of that size. But he did it, and they left, after instructing him to say nothing outside the bank about the transaction."

"Wuz Hod Maydew in on this monkey business?"

"No. He left last Monday night for Louisville and he's not back yet. Well, the next thing I did was to try to reach you by telephone, and I couldn't get this number. Uncle Billy, did you call anybody, say, about three quarters of an hour ago?" he demanded accusingly.

"Yep; I had an exchange of words with the sheriff's office. Got something fur the sheriff to do — mebbe!"

"And you left the receiver off the hook. Look yonder." He pointed toward his uncle's cluttered flat-topped desk.

"I git more furgitful every day I live," confessed the culprit.

"Since I couldn't raise you, I dusted

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right on out Franklin Street to Mrs. Broderick's. About noon the day before yesterday the girl came to her, so excited she could hardly speak, and told her she'd been up in her room packing and was going to go. At first she wouldn't say where she was going — said she'd pledged herself to tell nobody of the plan. But Mrs. Broderick managed to worm it out of her that she and her aunt-in-law had suddenly decided to start on a voyage around the world. They were slipping away now unexpectedly because there was somebody temporarily out of town who knew about the plan and might, if they delayed their departure until that somebody got back, try to put obstacles in the girl's path. Do you think that could be Hod Maydew?"

"I happen to be the party referred to," stated Judge Priest. "Go ahead."

"There's not much more. Before she pulled out, still fluttering like an egg beater, the little chucklehead told Mrs. Broderick, as a dead secret, that they were going to drive in a hired car to Wycksberg that evening and catch the Chicago-New Orleans southbound flyer as it passed through there at 7:10 o'clock at night; and that some time yesterday, out of New Orleans, they would sail for South American ports. Well, they caught the train all right. I confirmed that at Farrell Brothers' garage on my way out here, saw the fellow who drove 'em down. As they got aboard, the woman slipped him five dollars as a bribe to keep quiet. . . . Oh, yes, the girl told Mrs. Broderick the name of the ship — the *Southland Star*."

"So!" Judge Priest's wheezy drawl was quite gone. He spoke snappily: "Ef the train wuz on time, they got to New Orleans considerably more'n twenty-four hours ago, givin' them better'n a full day's start on us, dog-gone it! Jump to that telephone, son, and make central raise New Orleans."

Already Major Pitman was joggling the black rubber horn on its hook. "Who'll I get — the police?" He flung the question over his humped shoulder.

"Yes! No — I've got it!" The judge began snatching a litter of contents out of his pockets. "Got it here somewhere — name of one of the fellers I shot snipes with last week at that there Delta Club. Collector of the port there, or somethin'. Here 'tis." Judge Priest was thrusting a rumpled calling card into his nephew's hand. "Tell him I say to locate a ship called the *Southland Star*. Ef by one chance't in a hundred she ain't sailed or ain't out of the mouth of the river yit, ast him to detain her somehow, someway. Ef she has got away let him find out her fust port of call and how many passengers she carried — there's bound to be records — and, ef possible, the gineral descriptions of those passengers. Oh, yes — and whether the ship's got radio aboard. Tell him to report right back to us here. Tell that telephone girl to keep the line open. Wait, wait" — these next words seemed to be pumped out of him almost against his

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will — "Tell him — *and tell her too — it mout even be a matter of life and death!*"

He lumbered to and fro, rather like a caged hippo in a pet of impatience; then, with remarkable agility, he spun about as the telephone bell rang.

"If it's the man we're after, that's what I'd call service," said Major Pitman and glued his ear to the receiver.

It was the man he was after.

There passed forty of the longest minutes in the records of the present Christian era. For the major there was nothing to do except wait, and hold the wire and let the tolls mount up. When the other end of the wire came to life again he jumped as though he had been bee-stung. Next thing, Major Pitman was listening and answering back, and, in between, flinging over his shoulder to the palpitant Judge Priest condensed snatches of the news coming through — like this:

"*Southland Star*, independently owned, Captain Nicholson, master. Carries mostly cargo but has accommodations for a few passengers. . . . Cleared for Rio in Brazil at noon yesterday. . . . Reliable information is that she carried only two passengers, a woman and a girl. . . . No wireless equipment. . . . The collector says only a few minutes before casting off the skipper had his papers altered for a stop at Galveston to pick up a special freight consignment. . . . Ship ought to be there some time tomorrow, probably in the forenoon. . . . New Orleans officers glad to cooperate through the port authorities there. . . . Well, Uncle Billy, how about it?"

"Tell him I'm sending a thousand thanks and my best regards, and I'll be seein' him inside of a day or two, proba'ly. Tell him he needn't pester about Galveston, though. Tell him I aim to be there in the mornin' myself and handle the thing pussonally."

Having relayed the final message, Major Pitman turned a bewildered countenance upon his elder. "But, Uncle Billy, the trains can't possibly git anybody from here to Galveston by tomorrow morning."

"There's sich things ez aeroplanes, ain't there?"

"But who's going to fly us?"

"How about that there old army friend of yours, that Cap'n Duke Cubeman, that dropped out of the skies not three weeks ago to see you and give you a spin in that big, new amphibian machine that he's pilotin' all over this southern country fur the oil people up in Louieville? Git back on that long-distance line."

The younger man told central who it was that he wanted to reach this time. An afterthought came to him: "Uncle Billy, Duke's got room for four in that big machine, besides him and his partner, Spence. You could take the sheriff along with us."

"Tell your friend there'll be jest the two of us. Whilst we're gone the sheriff's goin' to be burglarizin' an occupied house and a locked-up smokehouse, and, on top of that, doin'

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about the most thorough job of rummagin' and diggin' and probin' and soundin' that he ever tackled yit. . . . Lawsy! I do wisht we could hear frum Richmond before we git away."

The words trailed off as he lumbered out the hall door and made for the front porch, to peer into the afternoon sunshine that gilded the empty reaches of Clay Street. Then, on cue, as theatrically as a belated entrance in a scene in a melodrama, a messenger boy pedaled up that golden path on a bicycle and bounced off at the gate and came trotting toward him. Halfway down the walk Judge Priest met him, and fairly tore an envelope out of the lad's hand, shucked it open, glanced hurriedly at the two pages of typewritten flimsy it had contained, and lunged for indoors.

Judge Priest shot into the living-room as Major Pitman straightened up from the desk with a hand cupped across the transmitter disk and said, "Duke's on the wire. He can be here in less than two hours. But he thinks he should give those oil people some reason for taking the plane."

Judge Priest's squeaky voice clarioned like notes from a cracked bugle: "Tell him there's been one cold-blooded murder. Tell him we ain't so much concerned with the murder that's been committed ez with the other that's bein' contemplated right this very minute. Then ring off, and look at this here."

The major told his friend, and rang off, and jumped up and snatched at the typed pages and read them through.

"Gosh!" he said, almost whispering it. "Your missing clue at last — the thing that unravels everything. . . ." Major Pitman was still speaking in that stricken half-whisper. "Uncle Billy, are you sure we'll get there in time?"

"Reasonably shore — that's all. I'm bankin' that common prudence will stay those deadly hands till we kin lock a set of handcuffs on 'em."

Trim-looking and smart for a tramp steamer, the *Southland Star* came inching up toward the harbor, and a tiny tug chugged down Galveston Bay to meet her before she landed. The tug carried a government flag. At a tooted signal the steamer slowed down, until she barely held headway.

As the smaller craft drew nearer, Judge Priest, balanced on spraddling legs in the tug's bow, murmured under his breath, "Thank the Good Lawd! The girl's at the stern yonder — jest came up on the top deck."

As they edged under her flank, the ship, drifting gently now, let down a landing ladder with broad rungs. Despite age and bulk, Judge Priest was the first to go up the side, Major Pitman following him, and then the Galveston chief of detectives and one of his men.

As Judge Priest's red face showed above the guard-rail, the girl's eyes widened. Giving a little smothered cry, she ran forward, and threw her-

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self against the old man's broad and panting breast.

"Oh, Judge, I'm so glad to see you!" she cried.

"Young woman," he wheezed sternly, "you went and broke your solemn promise to me."

"I know I did. But — but she nagged me into it. Oh, Judge Priest, there's something wrong — I can feel it. And I'm frightened."

"Jest where is this here tourin' companion of yours?" he asked.

"Downstairs — I mean, down below, in her cabin, right next to mine."

"And the money you took with you?"

"She has it — hers and mine, too. We were going to get — what do you call 'em? — letters of credit at New Orleans, but she said there wasn't time to stop —"

"You better wait right here, honey, with my nephew," he told her. "Me and these here two gentlemen have got some business with your — your travelin' mate."

The captain of the *Southland Star* had been in conference meanwhile with the officers. His face set gravely at what they told him, but he said nothing until they were done.

"This way," he said, leading the way.

The port officer stayed behind. The remaining four went down a companionway. They came to a metal door and the master of the vessel rapped on it with his knuckles.

"Who is it?" asked a voice from within.

"Captain Nicholson," he said.

"I'm not dressed for company; I'm doing my hair."

"Sorry," he called back, "but I must ask you to let me in."

"Come in, then."

The occupant of the roomy but plainly furnished cabin was sitting before a small dresser at the foot of the bunk; electric bulbs furnished illumination. The figure was black-clad; the heavy dark hair was loosened and flowing down about the shoulders. A heavy coating of white powder was upon the anxious face. At sight of strangers shouldering in behind the skipper, the form stiffened.

"What do you want?"

It was the chief of detectives who answered. "We want you," he said. "You're under arrest."

"What for?" The voice was gulping, choking, shaken, held under partial control by painful effort.

"We want you for murder, committed in Hickson County, Kentucky, on the twenty-fourth day of August."

There was a false note of incredulity, a cracked and futile effort at derision, in the words that fell slowly and forcedly from the stiffening, red-painted lips: "Are you actually accusing me of the murder of my husband?"

"No!" The retort came in a shrill piping from an unseen speaker beyond the threshold. "But we air accusin' you, Caleb Carmichael, of the murder of your wife."

In a frenzy of desperation the trapped killer leaped headlong at

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them, and went right between the startled captain and the chief, by a twist of the body eluded the clumsy, clutching hands of the second policeman, and would have been through the doorway except for a large bulk thrusting forward to block the flight. There was a thump of colliding bodies, a grunt from one, a hoarsely shouted oath and a blow from the other, a grappling, and the pair of them went down. Judge Priest somehow managed to be on top.

He stayed on top, indulging in curious billowing motions of his frame, until the officers could reach in beneath and pin the wrists of the one who was being crushed and lock the steel cuffs on.

One of Judge Priest's pudgy hands kept going up gently to caress a knobby bruise on his cheek where the murderer's fist had targeted its single chance blow. With Major Pitman he was speeding by motor across the coastal plains of southeastern Texas. Juliet Blair was already aboard a train bound for her home and her sweetheart. That blood kinsman of hers lay in the Galveston jail, and would continue to lie there until officers arrived with requisition papers for his return to Kentucky and a prompt trial. The old judge was doing most of the talking:

"When Lew Lake reads the big tidin's in tonight's *Evenin' News*, then he'll know whut it wuz kept confusin' the true path. Think of it, Ranny, 'twuz only yistiddy mornin' when us three sat there in my house speculatin' on this and that, and only yistiddy evenin' when I got that long telegram from Richmond that made the scales drop away frum my bewildered and befuddled old eyes! Considerin' whut's happened sense, it seems like about two weeks must have passed, instid of a space of twenty-odd hours. Boy, we been movin' fast!"

"So fast and so furiously," said the major, "that for me there are still points needing to be amplified — clarified, rather. Do you mind?"

"Mind doin' a little recapitulatin'? I should say not. When a job's finally done up all shipshape, it's only human nature fur a feller to crave to brag.

"F'rinstance now, take that suspiciously long delay at Reelfoot Lake, and the letter to the girl that wuz confiscated and destroyed, and the mashed thumb that wouldn't heal up, and, most of all, the bull-fiddle case. Those things alone should 'a' been enough to head me down the main track. But no, I kept lettin' that long hair and those false teeth and, biggest puzzle of all, those two photographs — I kept lettin' them steer me off on a blind sidin'. Yit all along I had the feelin' that when we got to the bottom of the matter of those photographs we'd see the whole thing jest unrollin' like a scroll. And the moment we got word of the finding of that obscure paragraph out of that country paper in Louisiana, it certainly did!

"Here's how I rebuilt the sequence: Hardly has he been doin' these female

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impersonations any time a-tall, but long enough to have at least two poses photographed in costume, when he gits a rich idea, and he says to himself, whut's the use of his wastin' this here new gift of his fur a cheap salary in a cheap travelin' show, when he kin utilize it where it'll guarantee an easier livin' and real dividends; like at fake spiritualistic séances, when he kin go into a seemin' trance ez a man, and five minutes later come slidin' out of the cabinet ez the embodied spirit of some poor dupe's dead mother or wife or daughter. So he leaves his hair long and hides it under a wig, and only sheds the wig when he's materializin' ez a woman.

"So, after all those intervenin' years, there he is, with that long hair fur his hole-card and a couple of copies of those old photographs ez aces up his sleeve when the word reaches him that he's come in fur a fat windfall.

"Fust, then, he decides ef he's goin' to have liberty and peace to enjoy his inheritance, he's got to disappear altogether and forever more ez Caleb Carmichael and thereafter be somebody else. And — and this is the real crux — ef his wife simultaneously disappears, he kin start bein' her and, ez his own heir, claim the estate and laugh in secret at those damages-hongry folks out in Seattle. All right, then. Let's assume that, ez a beginnin' step in his scheme, he induces his wife to write that affectionate letter to Juliet Blair. By the way, I'm pretty sure she wuz left-handed, Mrs. Martha Swopes Carmichael wuz. Suspectin' nothin', the deluded woman writes the letter. She gives it to him, unsealed, to be mailed. He takes out of it the authentic pictures of herself that she included and fur them substitutes the two misleadin' photographs of himself in his female make-up. Unbeknownst to her, he's got possession, someway, of a preserved dissectin'-room subject. At the same time, he lays in, fur future reference, a supply of some standard emba'min' fluid. Durin' one of her temporary absences he smuggles this cadaver that he's bought into the house and wedges it into his big fiddle case. And when he's packin' their car fur the trip to Kintucky, he puts the loaded case in the back of the car under a jag of stuff where neither she nor anybody else will have occasion to shift it. He hides the emba'min' fluid somewhere's else in the cargo.

"So off they start. All along he's had the Big Hole at the top of Reelfoot picked ez the spot where she's to die.

"Once't they're in that empty wilderness, he kills her. Workin' fast, he strips her body and strips down himself. He lugs the third passenger — the dead pauper — out of the overgrown fiddle case. He dresses the corpse of the stranger in the clothes he's just took off, and heaves it into the water to be drawed under. He dresses himself in the clothes he's stripped off his wife — and he does away with the wig he's been wearin'. He shakes down his long dyed hair, then puts it up on his head in coils, woman-fashion, and there, excusin'

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the marks left by the intervenin' years, stands the spittin' image of the original of the photographs already sent on to the Blair girl. Next thing, the doubled-up body of the dead woman has been jammed into the emptied fiddle case, and the fiddle case is back where it wuz before, underneath a couple of hundredweight of luggage. Even though he's worked so fast, he's been at this hellish business fur considerable more than an hour. He's got to hurry. Then, possibly ez an afterthought — he sticks the tip of his right thumb in the frame of the car door and mashes it good and hard. Now, any seemin' discrepancy in any writin' that the seemin' widder does kin be explained away on the ground that with a thumb crippled and a hand swathed in bandages a signature would natchelly differ from whut it's like ordinarily. So, till everything's settled up, the hurt mustn't be let to heal. That's why, between visits to a doctor, he keeps applyin' that smelly stuff that makes the wound angry, then washin' it off and restorin' the doctor's wrapping's before the next office call — the same stuff that wuz on the gauze Jeff Poindexter pilfered and that Lew Lake identified fur us yistiddy.

"Well, let's go back to Reelfoot: The 'widder' spreads the word of the drownin' and gits that damaged thumb fixed up temporarily, and drives on through, straight fur the safest refuge in the world — the place where he was born and spent his early boyhood, and where he's familiar with every inch, indoors and out. Nobody's there but two old servants.

"On arrivin' at his birthplace, he drags the fiddle case inside, singlehanded. I got it frum Jeff, who got it frum the two servants, that he wouldn't let 'em help with the unloadin'. Let somebody try to lift that varnished box and find how heavy 'twuz and 'twould be enough to set even a couple of old servants to thinkin'. So, bein' accepted by the pair of 'em fur whut seemin'ly he is, he gits busy in that empty house.

"Down in the cellar he dissects the cadaver of his victim and, under cover of night, packs the dismembered fragments outdoors and, piece by piece, burns 'em to ashes. He may 'a' used acids, too — he'd know about acids. Gittin' shet of the bull-fiddle case is a triflin' task in comparison with the main job. It's powerful hard fur a feller to utterly destroy every recognizable trace of an adult human body. Ef our sheriff's bunch find in that cellar or that smokehouse whut they're probably lookin' fur right this minute, it'll jest about purvide the last piece of evidence that's needed to speed our man to the scaffold.

"Here's the completed edifice: Ez soon ez the will's probated and the estate's divided and conditions air auspicious, he'll take the girl off on that sea voyage. Some dark night the girl falls overboard — that'll be his story. And who's to doubt it? Landin' in foreign parts, he tells a plausible enough tale to the authorities and the American consul. Ef there's no fuss

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raised back home, he waits around fur long enough to collect at long distance the proceeds frum the sale of whutever odds and ends may be left out of the estate of old Elijah. Ef a fuss is raised he charges it to profit and loss. Down there in some remote Latin-American country the Widder Carmichael vanishes and, instead, a strange gent with a new name goes on his way rejoicin' and packin' a gratifyin' small fortune in his jeans."

"I judge you're pretty tired, suh," said his junior. "But, Uncle Billy, there's one thing I've absolutely got to know: What was it that day in the courthouse that set you on the scent in the first place?"

"Oh, that? That's simple enough now that we've got all the rest added up fur the Doomsday book. Ef you want to know whut fust ketched my eye and started my imagination workin', it wuz the way he handled his hands a couple of times whilst Hod Maydew wuz elocutin'. You see, son, he wuz wearin' a woman's mournin' regalia. And whilst he'd doubtless worn sich riggin's plenty of times before in pursuance of his crooked doin's, nevertheless, he'd gone dressed ez a man a thousand hours, say, fur every hour that he'd gone dressed ez a woman. So he'd taken to fumblin' with the woman's jacket he wuz wearin', and that wuz when I dimly sensed somethin' wuz radically wrong."

"Just what do you mean, suh?"

"Well, a woman's clothes button frum right to left. So, when he got nervous and started buttonin' and then unbuttonin' his coat, me standin' there idly watchin' him, he went through the mechanism of tryin' to accomplish these two processes, not by the use of his left hand, which is a woman's way, but with his right hand — the hand a man natchelly would use — even though in this case 'twuz made clumsy and awkward frum bein' all done up in bandages."

"Well, I'll be darned!" Major Pitman exploded.

"I'm plenty ashamed, myself, fur bein' so stupid," said his uncle.

"My guess is the people back in our bailiwick don't share that opinion," declared Major Pitman. "By now they're singing your praises all over town."

"Ef credit is to go where credit is properly due, they'd better save out quite a jag fur Jeff Poindexter," stated the judge. "There's no tellin' how many years it took off of Jeff's life, him prowling about, and finally into a house where, frum whut I'd told him, he could figger that, by a remote possibility, a murdered dead body had been carved up. . . ."

"I've got a twenty-dollar bill in my pocket that I'm going to slip him," said the major. "I've got a good suit of clothes I'd like to give him, too, if I weren't twice his size."

"Son, don't you worry none on that score. You'll be surprised to note how much better that there suit'll look on Jeff than it ever did on you. The clothes don't have to fit Jeff. Jeff jest natchelly fits the clothes."

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It has been much too long a time since we brought you a new adventure of Nick Noble, the sharp-nosed, white-skinned, blue-eyed inhabitant of the fourth booth on the left in the Chula Negra — one of the most memorable dipso-detectives ever conceived. But Mr. Boucher has been busy this past year and a half. He has been preoccupied with phantoms and phenomena, with time flaws and space ships and even an occasional Bug-Eyed Monster. He and J. Francis McComas have been editing "The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction," and doing a splendid job. But fantasy and stf have pulled Mr. Boucher away from detective-story writing, have divided his loyalties and split his personality. They have even caused Mr. Boucher to succumb to certain gloomy and pessimistic conclusions about the present state of the mystery story. In an article in "The New York Times" of June 11, 1950, Mr. Boucher partly ascribed the rise of science fiction to the relative ease with which the public accepts new concepts — "and possibly another reason lies in some exhaustion of the mystery novel." Then later in the same article, Mr. Boucher expressed his fear that "mysteries are running out of fresh material."

These are fighting words, Mr. B., and they should be answered. The detective short story, we refute, has never been in a healthier state, physically or mentally. Look at the record, Mr. B. — the record of the 1940s: Dashiell Hammett has published a series of seven volumes of detective shorts, with two more to come; Cornell Woolrich, under the name of William Irish, has had nine volumes of detective shorts issued, with more to come. And what of the work of such contemporaries as Agatha Christie, T. S. Stribling, Georges Simenon, Margery Allingham, John Dickson Carr, Q. Patrick, Stuart Palmer, Roy Vickers, William Faulkner (winner of the 1949 Nobel Prize), Lawrence G. Blochman, et al.? No, Mr. B., there is no sign of "exhaustion" or "running out of fresh material."

CRIME MUST HAVE A STOP

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

THE third set of flashbulbs exploded and the actress relaxed and pulled down her skirt. Lieutenant MacDonald continued to stare somewhat foolishly at the silver trophy in his hands.

"Well?" the actress grinned. "How does it feel to be the recipient of the

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Real Detective Award for the Real Detective of the Year?"

"Thirstifying," said MacDonald honestly.

The actress nodded. "Well spoken, my fine ferreting friend. I always feel a spot of alcohol is indicated after cheesecake myself. Where are we going?"

MacDonald still contemplated the trophy. It had been exciting, very exciting, to be chosen by the top fact-crime radio program for its annual award; but he'd been feeling uneasy ever since the announcement. Despite the extraordinary record of solved cases that had made him the bright young star of the Los Angeles Police Department, he felt like an impostor.

"Mind a ride downtown?" he asked. "We're going to deliver this trophy to the man it really belongs to."

The actress raised her unplucked brows as they turned east on Sunset. "I've worked in Hollywood for three years," she said, "and I've never known whether Sunset Boulevard ran beyond Gower. They tell me there's a city called Los Angeles down this way. That where we're going?"

"Uh huh. And you're going to meet the damnedest man in that city of the damned . . ." And MacDonald began the story.

He began with his own first case — the case that started with his finding a dead priest and ended with his shooting one of his fellow lieutenants. He explained where he had found the solution of that case, and where he had found the solution for which he had just been awarded the trophy.

"You weren't giving awards back in the early thirties," he said. "But there was a man in the department then who topped anybody you've honored. He had a mind . . . it's hard to describe: a mind of mathematical precision, with a screwball offbeat quality — a mind that could see the shape of things, grasp the inherent pattern —"

"Like a good director," the actress put in.

"Something," MacDonald admitted. "Then there came that political scandal — maybe you've heard echoes — and the big shake-up. There was a captain who knew what wires to pull, and there was a lieutenant who took the rap. The lieutenant was our boy. He had a wife then and she needed an operation. The pay checks stopped coming and she didn't get it . . ."

The actress's lively face grew grave as she followed the relentless story of the disintegration of greatness: the brilliant young detective, stripped at once of career and wife, slipping, skidding, until there was nothing left but the comfort of cheap sherry and the occasional quickening of the mind when it was confronted with a problem . . .

MacDonald pulled up in front of the Chula Negra. He peered in, caught sight of Mamá Gonzales' third daughter Rosario, and beckoned her

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to the door. "You got any marches on your juke box?" he asked, handing her a nickel.

So it was to the strains of the Mexican national hymn that the Real Detective Award trophy entered the little Mexican restaurant. Lieutenant MacDonald bore it proudly aloft and the actress followed him, confused and vaguely delighted.

Mexicanos al grito de guerra . . .

MacDonald halted in front of the fourth booth on the left, with the certainty of finding its sharp-nosed white-skinned inhabitant. He placed the trophy on the table, flourished his hand and proclaimed, "To the Real Detective of The Year!"

The actress placed one foot on the bench and lifted her skirt over her knee. "That makes it an official award," she grinned.

. . . al sonoro rugir del cañón boompty boomp!

Nick Noble's pale blue eyes surveyed the symbolic silver figure of Justice Triumphant Over Wrongdoing. "If it was only a cup . . ." he sighed, and downed his water glass of sherry.

That was the start of an evening memorable in many ways. It was MacDonald's first non-professional visit to the Chula Negra; and he was amazed to realize that Nick Noble could drop cryptic comments on the theater of twenty years ago which fascinated the actress as much as his comments on crime had stimulated the lieutenant. He was further amazed to realize the warmth and vitality of the girl beside him, whom he had at first regarded solely as the inevitable wench demanded by cameramen.

They fitted together somehow, her bubbling eagerness and Noble's weary terseness. They belonged together because they were the same thing underneath, the same piercing through of conventional acceptance, straight to reality. MacDonald was growing more and more aware of the girl, more and more aware of the peculiarity of a man's being single in his thirties, when the episode began which was to make the evening completely memorable.

It started unspectacularly enough, with a voice calling, "Hi, Don!"

The voice was high-pitched, but firmly male — a tenor with baritone quality. The man was slight but firmly built, dressed in the standard mismatched uniform of middle-bracket Hollywood, and MacDonald was certain he'd never seen him before. But even as the man seized his hand, as the actress looked up curiously and Nick Noble finished his latest sherry, MacDonald began thinking back. Far back, obviously. Anyone who called him Don dated from college days at USC. Now he was Mac or Lieutenant or Loot. A faint but ghastly picture flitted across his mind, of something called an Apolliad, an evening of students' creative contributions to the higher literature. There must be some reason why he was thinking of that — there must, in fact, have been some reason why he had attended it . . .

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"Steve Harnett!" he cried. "You old son of a —" He broke off, glancing sideways at the actress.

"I've heard the word," she said dryly. "I just didn't think men ever greeted each other that way outside of bad plays and Rotary Club meetings."

"It's grand to see you, Don," Harnett was saying. "I keep reading about you in the papers and saying I've got to look you up and then . . . well, you know how it is."

"Don't I," MacDonald confessed. "I read about you too. I'll go you one better: I even listen to *Pursuit*, just to see how far away from real murder you can get."

"Oh! Do you write *Pursuit*?" Only half of the girl's breathlessness was good technique.

"I should've warned you." MacDonald looked rueful. "She's a radio actress."

"And therefore should know by now that a writer's introduction to the producer is the kiss of death. Still you might as well introduce us."

"Sure . . . Good Lord! Do you realize that in all the hullabaloo of those publicity photographs I never did catch your name?"

"Lynn Dvorak," said Nick Noble quietly.

"Don't tell me that's a deduction!"

"Asked her. While you were greeting friend."

MacDonald grinned. "If all your rabbits-out-of-sherry-bottles were as simple as that —"

"They are," said Noble. "To me." His washed-out blue eyes glazed over oddly as he contemplated the actress and the radio writer.

Someone presumably introduced Tristan to Iseult and Paolo to Francesca. No one introduced Petrarch to Laura, so no one wrote a tragedy on the subject culminating in murder. Someone introduced Harvey Hawley Crippen to Ethel LeNeve and someone introduced Judd Gray to Ruth Snyder.

And Lieutenant Donald MacDonald, Homicide, LAPD, said, "Lynn Dvorak, may I present Steve Harnett?"

So for once, MacDonald was later to reflect, Nick Noble had been in on a murder even before it happened. It was in October, that first and fatal interview, and throughout that winter the lieutenant kept running into Steve and Lynn, at the Philharmonic, at Musso and Frank's, at the Biltmore Theater, until he began thinking of them as SteveandLynn in one word, and automatically looking for one if he saw the other.

"I started something," he would muse ruefully as he had a drink with them after a concert. It was not only that they were physically in love (even to the hand-holding-in-public stage, which was embarrassing in a man of Steve's thirty-six years); but they obviously fitted together so well in so many non-physical respects. Their ears heard the same music; their mouths laughed the same laughter.

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But with Steve at least there was something under the laughter, something that caused moments when the successful writer, the man happily in love, gave way for an instant to a small boy, terrified of some incalculable but certain retribution.

It was one of those moments that seized Steve as the three of them were drinking after an unusually interesting production of one-acts at the Actors' Lab. He had said nothing for five minutes, and there was supplication in the glance Lynn cast to MacDonald as she gave up her single-handed attempt at brightness and retired to the ladies' room.

MacDonald could think of nothing to do but emit that wordless questioning noise and assume that sympathetic half-smile which had caused the Pengcraft murderer to reveal where he had hidden the other half of the body.

Steve Harnett roused himself from his brooding. "I've got to talk to you, Don," he said abruptly. "It's getting me down. I can't think straight."

"Any time," said MacDonald. "Unless a crime wave takes priority."

"Dinner next Thursday?" Steve said eagerly. "I'm in Brentwood; it's in the phone book. Say around seven for drinks?"

MacDonald made a note and tried to smile reassuringly at Lynn when she came back.

"That couple you introduced here?" Nick Noble asked two nights later, when MacDonald had dropped in with a report on the death-cell confession of a man in whose career Noble had taken a certain decisive interest. "They all right?"

"Sure. I guess so."

"Liked the girl. Alive — like Martha . . . Trouble for her. Sorry . . ."

"Why should there be trouble?" MacDonald asked uneasily.

Nick Noble paused and deliberately brushed away the fly which always perched invisibly on his sharp nose. "Call it . . . the Unspeckled Band," he said.

There were times, MacDonald reflected as he beckoned to Rosario, when Nick Noble's cryptic impulses seemed to spring from pure malice.

The Harnett home was small, comfortable, unpretentious, and therefore probably only mildly fabulous in cost. Steve Harnett, MacDonald had learned from a few questions of other friends in radio, was well in the charge-account-at-the-Brown-Derby class but somewhat short of the swimming pool level. His questions should have prepared him for his first surprise; but there was one question he hadn't thought to ask.

The woman who answered the door was in her early thirties — slender, a trifle pale, and more than a trifle attractive, again in a comfortable, unpretentious, and mildly expensive manner. She held out a hand and said, "Good evening. Lieutenant MacDonald? I'm Harriet — Steve's wife."

Abruptly MacDonald understood the Unspeckled Band — the colorless

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strip on Steve's third finger, left hand. He was still trying to mask his angry amazement with polite conversation when Steve came in, followed by a plain heavy-set girl with a handful of papers. Here in Brentwood domesticity, MacDonald observed, Steve wore a plain gold wedding ring.

"Glad you could make it, Don. You and Harriet getting yourselves acquainted? This is Pat McVeagh, my secretary — Lieutenant MacDonald." And he was suddenly very busy with ice and gin and vermouth and lemon peel and the careful avoidance of MacDonald's eyes.

The secretary left after one drink, without having opened her mouth for any non-alcoholic purpose. Then, just as MacDonald was trying to get the feel of the Harriet-Steve relationship, the elder Mrs. Harnett slipped in and there were more introductions.

MacDonald could not have told you, an hour after dinner, what he had eaten. He was too concentrated on trying to persuade himself that he was on a social and not a professional visit. He was too surrounded by all too tangible undercurrents.

Mrs. Harnett Sr., he decided, was the most obtrusively unobtrusive little old lady he had ever known. She effaced herself completely — a gray wraith in a corner, coming to life only with an occasional plaintive don't-mind-me. But whatever topic was under discussion — another round of drinks, a proposed weekend at La Jolla, a new limerick of Steve's composition — her quiet reminder of her own self-effacement had the power of a Security Council veto.

There were other undercurrents: a barb from Steve to Harriet about the cooking of the dinner, a barb from Harriet to Steve about his prospects in radio, some obscure reference to the absent secretary . . .

It was with great relief that MacDonald let Steve drag him off to the study as soon as decently possible after dinner. It was a good room, from the outmodedly comfortable chairs to the cases full of erratically and lovingly chosen books, from the battered standard typewriter to the miniature electric icebox, of the type usually employed for baby formula.

Steve Harnett took two cans of beer from the box, punctured them, handed one to his guest, kicked off his shoes, and began to pace around the room.

"Necessary adjunct to work, beer," he muttered. "Always figure it takes me exactly a quart to a script."

"You work on beer and Nick Noble on sherry," MacDonald observed. "And I can't drink on duty. There's no justice in this world." He waited, but Steve went on pacing. "You never mentioned Harriet," he said expressionlessly. "I suppose I must've read about your marriage in an alumni bulletin, but I'd forgotten."

"We've been married ten years." Steve's voice was more tenor than baritone now.

"Any children?"

"Last fall we were hoping . . . That's when I met you. But in De-

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cember Harriet had to go to the hospital. Now they say we won't ever."

"So it all started while Harriet was —"

Steve stopped pacing. "Don't think I'm saying that to justify it, Don. I'm not. I can't justify it, not even to myself. But it's happened — hell, it happened that night down at your little Mex joint. *Dead Shepherd, now I find thy saw of might . . .*"

"*. . . Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?*" MacDonald finished for him. "I remember, Steve. You always were a sucker for quotations. Lends authority, doesn't it? Takes away your own responsibility for what you're saying."

"Does my radio-trained ear detect what we cliché-experts call a thinly-veiled edge of contempt in your voice, Don?"

"It's no business of mine," MacDonald said optimistically. "But you're getting yourself into one sweet mess. Does Harriet know?"

"I don't think so."

"She's bound to eventually. You haven't been precisely discreet, and there's always a helpful friend . . . Does Lynn know about Harriet?"

"Yes . . ." Steve's eyes rested on the gold band on his left hand.

"In other words, now she does but she didn't at first?"

Steve didn't answer that one. Instead he said, "But, Don, you don't understand. Maybe nobody can until it happens to him. But this . . . this isn't just an affair."

"Are they ever?"

"It isn't just . . . fun in bed. It's being together — being *us*."

"So what did you want me for? Name of a good lawyer?"

Steve drew back suddenly. "But I couldn't divorce Harriet. I love her."

"Let them eat cake," MacDonald snorted, "and have it too!"

"Don't you see, Don? They're both so . . . so right. Both things. The thing with me and Harriet and the thing with me and Lynn. I can't say: this I cleave to, this I discard. It wouldn't be fair to either of them."

"Which the present situation, of course, is."

"Hell, Don, I'm not an adulterer." Steve managed an odd sort of smile. "I'm a bigamist." He added hesitantly, "There's a quotation for that too: *How happy could I be with either, were 'tother fair charmer away . . .*"

MacDonald could not swear why he shivered at that moment, but he had a rough idea. "I still don't see why you wanted to talk to me about it. I did introduce you, but . . ."

"I think it's because I knew you pretty well a long time ago, but you're not a part of my present life. I had to talk to somebody. I can't talk to the people who know me and Harriet now. I had to talk it out just to see if . . ."

MacDonald knew very well why he was shivering as he replied, "You know, Steve, I don't think that was the reason . . . underneath."

"And it wasn't, I'm sure," MacDonald said later that night to Nick

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Noble. "You asked about trouble. Here it is, and your Unspeckled Band can prove as venomous as a swamp adder, if that's what it was. And subconsciously, at least, Steve sees it too: that this is the build-up to a standard, cliché-expert murder situation. Each woman has a motive for killing the other; and if Steve ever gets out of the equipoise of his *Beggars' Opera* how-happy-could-I-be-with-either, he'll have a motive for getting rid of the girl left over. That subconscious fear of murder led him to expose the situation to a Homicide officer."

There was a water glass full of sherry in front of Nick Noble. He took what seemed like a casual swig, and the glass was half full. Then he muttered "*Beggars' Opera*?" and shook his head. "Groucho Marx," he said decisively.

Even after long years of inoculation Lieutenant MacDonald could still occasionally be taken aback in the Chula Negra. "And how did Groucho Marx get into this?"

"Didn't ever see *Animal Crackers*?" Noble murmured regretfully. "Long time ago. 'Way back when . . ."

His voice trailed away. MacDonald understood. 'Way back when Lieutenant Nicholas Noble, the pride of Homicide, took his beautiful wife Martha to the pictures . . .

"But what can I do?" MacDonald insisted. "What can any officer do when he sees a murder building up in front of him — cast and motives complete and nothing to do but wait until it happens?"

For once Nick Noble had not even a cryptic answer.

That was in March. The murder did not come until late April. In the interval MacDonald steered away from any contact with Steve and Lynn; a meeting now could prove too embarrassing. But he heard enough gossip to know that Harriet, if still ignorant, must have no friends and no telephone. And he heard other gossip, too, to the effect that Steve Harnett was cracking up as a radio writer, that his option wouldn't be picked up at the end of this thirteen on *Pursuit*, which with the free-lance market shot to pieces . . .

MacDonald had tried to avoid embarrassment in seeing Steve again. But it was not embarrassment that he felt now in April as he faced Steve Harnett, beside the pink-ruffled bed which held Harriet's curiously arched body. There was no emotion save cold rage in MacDonald's voice as he roared, "So you finally made up your mind!"

Steve had his shoes off and a tumbler of straight whisky in his hand. He looked up helplessly and said, "You won't believe me, Don. Why should you? But you don't understand . . ."

MacDonald controlled his voice. "Look, Steve. There's only one way to play this. I'm just any cop and you're just any . . . husband of the deceased. All right, we know it's strychnine; even a layman could tell that. Now tell me how."

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Steve's vitality and charm had yielded to bewildered chaos. "As I was saying, it must have been the candy. I was working late and Harriet took the candy to bed with her. I worked so late I slept on the couch in the study. This morning Mother . . . found her."

"Nobody heard anything? She must've gone through hell."

"Mother's not well; she usually takes phenobarbital at night. And when a script's going hot, the house could fall down and I wouldn't know it."

"Now this candy . . .?"

"I was telling you, it just came in the mail and we thought whoever forgot to put in a card would phone about it. It's a kind Harriet likes, so —"

"And you write mystery shows!" MacDonald gasped. "One of the oldest clichés — in fact and fiction — and you let your wife . . . ! I suppose there's independent evidence that the candy actually did come in the mail?"

"Mother was with us when Harriet opened the package. She didn't want any; sweets upset her. And I was drinking beer, so Harriet took them to bed later on. I think the wrapper's still in the wastebasket . . ."

A brand-new machine had replaced the battered standard in Steve's study. MacDonald found a label in the drawer of the desk and inserted it in the typewriter. When he had finished typing, he set it beside the label on the wrapper from the wastebasket. There was no telling the two labels apart.

Steve's mouth opened wide. "But does that prove . . . ?"

"No," MacDonald grunted. "It doesn't. It's a new machine. It hasn't had time to develop obvious idiosyncrasies. Any new typewriter of the same model would have approximately the same result. But it does indicate —"

The phone rang. MacDonald picked it up.

An impersonal voice announced, "I have a call from New York for Mr. Stephen Harnett."

"New York for you," said MacDonald.

"Sponsor trouble," Steve groaned. "Or the network on that last script — I was afraid it was a little too . . . Blast it! I can't handle things like that now. I can't . . ."

"Try," said MacDonald. "Occupy your mind while I see Lynn Dvorak."

Steve had started to reach a shaky hand toward the phone. Now he snatched it back. "Lynn! You can't drag her into this!"

"Can't I? You say you're innocent. OK. Who else has a motive? Go talk to your sponsor."

"Lynn . . ." There was horror in Steve's eyes. "She couldn't have . . ."

"Go on. Telephone. See you later."

Steve laughed harshly. "Life must go on and stuff. *And life's crime's fool.* . ."

Steve Harnett's hand wavered halfway to the telephone. As MacDonald left the room he could hear angry

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squawks coming from the still unanswered receiver.

The lieutenant had never been more wretched on professional business than he was as he drove to the little house in the hills east of Highland, almost in downtown Hollywood.

A baffling case was one thing. That you could sink your teeth into; or if it was too flatly impossible, you could take it to the Chula Negra and watch Nick Noble's eyes glaze over as he probed to the truth. But something so wretchedly obvious as this . . .

He had, inadvertently, started it all. He had, quite advertently, foreseen its inevitable outcome. And here it was.

He remembered Steve Harnett, even back at the University, as flashy, clever, plausible, entertaining — but essentially weak. There'd been something (he couldn't recall the details) about a girl that Mrs. Harnett didn't quite approve of and how she'd managed to break up the relationship. And there'd been that odd episode when Steve was directing a play: the two girls, both beautiful, both good actresses, both avid for the lead — and Steve's sudden pneumonia, followed by two weeks' convalescence on the desert while someone else took over the direction and casting . . .

A psychoanalyst, he reflected, could have fun — probably would have, if there was enough money in the defense. And meanwhile the layman could content himself with the old-fashioned verdict that there were certain people who simply didn't have the courage to face up to things.

There was, of course, the remote possibility that Lynn might be the actual sender of the strychnine-laden chocolates. But how much did that direct responsibility matter compared with the ultimate responsibility of what Steve had done to both women? Except, of course, that in that case Lynn would go to the gas chamber and Steve would probably go on writing radio melodramas . . .

There was no answer to his ring. The door was unlocked, so he didn't have to worry about skeleton keys.

He didn't have to worry about Lynn and the gas chamber, either.

She sat in a chair half-facing the door, well lit by the reading lamp which must have been left burning from the night before. Her face grinned at him, in that sardonic welcome which only a strychnine-fed host can provide.

There were smudges of chocolate on the grinning lips, and there was a box of chocolates on the table by the phone.

MacDonald used the phone to call the necessary technicians. Before they arrived he had discovered in the wastebasket the familiar wrapper and the familiar typed label.

"And now," MacDonald demanded in the fourth booth on the left of the Chula Negra, "where the hell are we?"

"Hell," said Nick Noble succinctly and truthfully.

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"It made sense before. Steve had made up his mind. He didn't have the heart or the guts to make a clean cut, so he simply removed the one he didn't want. It would've made the same kind of sense if we'd found only Lynn. But both of them . . . that switches the motivation altogether. Now we have to look for somebody who wants *both women* out of Steve Harnett's life. And who has such a motive?" He paused and tried to answer himself. "I've got to look into the secretary. Every so often there's something in this office-wife business. She's a dowdy, homely wench, but she probably doesn't see herself that way."

"Labels," said Nick Noble. "Let's see."

MacDonald placed them before him:

Mrs Stephen Harnett
11749 Verdugo Drive
Los Angeles 24, Calif

Mrs Lynn Dvorak
6708 Las Aves Road
Hollywood 28, Calif

Nick Noble leaned back in the booth and a film seemed to obscure his eyes. "Mrs. . . ?" he said softly.

"Lynn? Divorced. Three years ago. That doesn't enter in. You'll notice the postmark, too. Downtown Hollywood. Steve admitted he'd been in to see the advertising agency; but that doesn't help now. The secretary lives near here — which might be a good reason for not mailing here. And that reminds me: I'm down in this part of town to see her. I'd better —"

"Why?" said Nick Noble.

MacDonald smilingly disregarded the query. "Oh — one odd thing I forgot to tell you about Steve. When that New York call came through he muttered something about life goes on, and added: *Life's crime's fool.* I told you he's a sucker for quotations, but I couldn't spot this one; it bothered me, so I stopped at the library and used a concordance. It's Hotspur's death speech in *Henry IV, Part I*, the same speech Huxley used for a title a while back, only it's properly *Life's* time's *fool.* Interesting subconscious twist, don't you think?"

Nick Noble's lips moved softly, almost inaudibly:

But thought's the slave of life, and life's time's fool;
And time, that takes survey of all the world,
Must have a stop . . .

He broke off, looking almost embarrassed by so long and articulate a speech. "Wife and I," he explained. "Used to read Shakespeare. *Time . . . crime . . . must have a stop.*"

"Lieutenant MacDonald?"

This was a strange new voice, deep, with a slight Central European accent. Bitterly remembering what had begun when last a new voice accosted him in the Chula Negra, MacDonald looked up to see a dapper little man waving a sheet of notepaper at him.

"They tell me at your Headquar-

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ters," the little man was saying, "I may possibly find you in this *Lokal;* so I come. Our friend Stephen Harnett gives me this letter for you long since, but I am first now in Los Angeles with the opportunity to present it."

Puzzled, MacDonald began to read:

Dear Don:

This is to introduce Dr Ferdinand Wahrschein, who is (need I say?) a friend of the sponsor's wife and who is conducting a technical investigation into American police methods. I'd deeply appreciate (and so would the sponsor) any help which you can give him.

Sincerely,

Steve

The lieutenant rose, tossing the letter to Nick Noble. "Delighted to meet you, but you catch me just when I am leaving to interview a witness, and I'd sooner do it alone. But I tell you what: if you really want to know how the local department cracks its toughest nuts, you stay right here with The Master."

And he was gone. Dr. Ferdinand Wahrschein stared speculatively at the pinched white face in the booth, then gingerly seated himself and resignedly began, "*Na also!* Is it your finding that the anthropometric method —"

"Sherry?" suggested Nick Noble hospitably.

Miss Patricia McVeagh had a room (adjacent bath — no cooking priv.) in what had once been an old family mansion on Bunker Hill. Lieutenant MacDonald walked from the Chula Negra to Third and Hill and there rode up the funicular Angels' Flight. He was glad he was in plain clothes. The once fashionable Bunker Hill district is now tenanted largely by Mexicans and by Americans of Spanish-Indian descent, many of whom feel they have good reason not to care for uniformed members of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Miss McVeagh opened the door and said, "Lieutenant MacDonald, isn't it? What on earth . . .?" Her tone meant (a) she hadn't seen today's papers, or (b) such an actress was wasting her time as a secretary.

She hadn't grown any more glamorous since the martinis in March; but there was something possibly preferable to glamor in the smile of hospitality which managed to conquer her puzzlement.

MacDonald began abruptly, "I don't need to bother you with the complete fill-in," which is one of the best known ways of causing witnesses to volunteer their own suggestions. "It's just a routine matter of checking certain movements in the Harnett household. I gather you weren't working there today?"

Miss McVeagh smiled. "Is that what Mr. Harnett told you? I suppose I shouldn't . . . Look, Lieutenant; I don't have anything to drink, but how about some Nescafé? I could talk easier with a cup in my hand. Do you mind?"

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MacDonald did not mind. He liked people to talk easy. And while he waited for the Nescafé, he decided he liked people who lived in cheap rooms and spent the money they saved on a judicious balance of Bach (Johann Sebastian) and Tatum (Art).

Miss McVeagh came back with two cups and a carbon copy of a letter. "If it's just where do I stand with the Harnett household, this letter ought to clear things up. I mailed it this morning."

MacDonald read:

Dear Mr. Harnett:

I realize that your financial position since "Pursuit" did not pick up the option makes my regular employment out of the question. But I still feel, as I told you that time when I so mistakenly took a second of your martinis, that a good secretary is also a collaborator.

For that reason, I'd like to offer to place my secretarial services on a speculative basis. The exact terms we can work out if you like the idea; but the general notion would be that I'd work on the usual schedule, but be paid anywhere from $0.00 to $?.?? according to your monthly income level.

He stopped reading there and said, "You love him that much?"

"Love?" Her mouth opened wide.

"You'd work for nothing just to try to pull him back on his feet?"

"I would. So where does love come in?"

"It would seem," MacDonald observed between swallows of Nescafé, "to indicate at least a certain . . . devotion."

"Sure," she nodded. "Devotion to Pat McVeagh. Look, Lieutenant. Steve Harnett's good. When he does write, he can write like a blue streak. And when he gets himself straightened out, he's going to hit the big time. What's radio? What's five hundred a week . . . said she blithely on Bunker Hill. But it's true: it's the real big time Steve Harnett's headed for, and when he hits it, I want in."

"This not being straightened out," MacDonald ventured. "It's been bad?"

"It's been hell," she said flatly. "I'll tell you: Last week I was typing some letters on the standard out in the patio. He was supposed to be roughing out a plot in the study on his portable. Comes time for me to go home, he has to sign the letters, he hasn't emerged, I take a chance on his wrath and knock on the study door. He doesn't shout. He just whispers 'Come in,' and I come in and there he is. He's been in there eight hours. He hasn't done one blessed word. His hands are shaking and his eyes look like he's going to cry. I give him the letters, he picks up a pen, and it falls out of his fingers. That's how bad it's been, Lieutenant; but I'm still sold on him and I'll take my chances."

Dr. Ferdinand Wahrschein felt a buzzing in his head. He was not sure

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whether to attribute it to his first experience with California sherry by the water glass, or to the answers he was receiving to his methodically prepared questionnaire. Nine out of ten of those answers would baffle him completely; but the tenth would cast a lightning flash of clarification on a long obscure problem.

Pleasantly bebuzzed, he sat back and listened to Lieutenant MacDonald's résumé of his conversation with Miss McVeagh. "I'm sold on her, Nick," MacDonald ended. "Here: read her letter. I'll swear that's an absolutely honest expression of just what her interest in Steve Harnett is. And if she's out on motive, who's left?"

Nick Noble accepted the letter and handed back another paper in exchange. "Something for you to read too. Came by messenger."

My dear Mr. Noble:

My son informs me that he has once met you, and that you have had extraordinary success in solving problems perplexing to the regular police.

Though I do not know you, may I beg you to exert your abilities on the problem of the deaths of my son's wife and of his friend? My son is no ordinary man; and his peace of mind, if you can secure it, will be deeply valued by

Your sincere friend,
Florence Harnett
(Mrs. S. T. Harnett)

"See it now?" said Nick Noble.

MacDonald felt Dr. Wahrschein's beady and eager eyes on him, and sensed vaguely that the honor of the department depended on him. "I can't say . . ." he began.

"Labels," said Nick Noble. "Look at them."

MacDonald looked at the labels. He stared at them. He glared at them. He scrutinized their inscrutability. Then suddenly he seized the other three papers which lay on the table, spread them in a row before him, looked from one to the other, and slowly nodded.

"You see?" said Nick Noble. "Clear pattern. Three main points. *1:* Groucho Marx."

MacDonald nodded gravely; he'd remembered that one. Meanwhile Dr. Ferdinand Wahrschein stared at him.

"2," Noble went on: "the cliché."

"Cliché?"

"The chocolates. Everybody knows gimmick. Botkin, Molineux, Anthony Berkeley. Why eat? Unless . . ."

"Of course. And the third point . . ." MacDonald indicated the assorted papers before him and echoed Noble's own statement. "Crime must have a stop."

Dr. Ferdinand Wahrschein giggled and beckoned to Rosario for more sherry. This essay on American police methods should be *aber fabelhaft!*

Steve Harnett filled his glass of straight whisky. "I'm alone," he said thickly. "Alone. They're gone. Harriet's gone. Lynn's gone too. *How happy* . . . But they're gone." His bare toes wiggled in anguish. "And

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Pursuit's gone too, come Thursday week. And McVeagh's gone on account of I can't pay her any more. I'm alone . . ."

"Are you?" Mrs. Harnett asked gently. She sat unobtrusively in a corner while her son paced the room.

"I know," Steve muttered. "You're here. You're always here, darling, and you know how much . . . ! Blast it, there is truth in clichés. A man's best mother is his — "

The phone rang.

"I'll take it, dear." Mrs. Harnett seemed hardly to move, but the phone had not rung three times before she answered it. "Just a minute," she said quietly into the mouthpiece. "I'll see if he's in." She put her hand over the diaphragm as she whispered, "New York."

Steve let out a yell. "They fire me and still they own my soul while the contract runs! But I can't. Not now I can't. Look at my hands. They're quivering like an aspen . . . an aspic . . . an aspen . . ."

He was still judiciously weighing the two words when Mrs. Harnett had finished murmuring apologies and hung up. "I'll stand between you and these things now, dear," she murmured. "I'll —"

But the next ring was on the doorbell, and Lieutenant MacDonald was not having any standing between. He strode in, snatched the glass from Steve, and began talking.

"This thing sticking out of my pocket," he said, "is a warrant. Just so a mystery plot man like you gets all the gimmicks straight, we'll brief it. You couldn't make up your mind, could you? You kept quoting *How happy could I be with either* . . . Only there's another quote that starts like that. It was Groucho Marx who said, *How happy I could be with either of these women . . . if only both of them would go away!* And that's the decision you reached. You were going to pieces; and what a nice simple life you could have if only you weren't bothered with *either* Harriet or Lynn. No more problems, no decisions, no impingements . . . just you alone, in your insufficient self-sufficiency . . .!"

Steve said, "If I had that glass back I could think better."

"You don't want things outside yourself, but you can't live without them. You've found that out by now, haven't you? OK, take the glass. And take the proof. There's been too much written about poisoned chocolates. Nobody'd eat an anonymous gift nowadays — especially no one close to a gimmick-conscious man like you. *Unless* they were reassured. 'Stupid of me, darling; I forgot to put in the card.' And who's the only person who, immediately or by phone, could reassure *both* Harriet and Lynn?

"And the best proof. Crime must have a stop. A full stop. The typewriter was almost certainly the one in your study, but that proved nothing. Anybody could've used it — Miss McVeagh, your mother . . . But typing habits are something else. And typists are divided into those who do and do not put a period, a full stop,

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after abbreviations like *Mr.* and *Mrs.* I saw a letter of McVeagh's; she wrote *Mr. Harnett* — M, R, period. I saw a note from your mother; she wrote *Mr. Noble* — M, R, period. I saw a note from you; you wrote *Dr Ferdinand Wahrschein* — D, R, no period. And the murder labels were both addressed *Mrs* — M, R, S, *no period.*

"The D. A.'ll want to know where the strychnine came from. I'll make a guess. Your mother's a semi-invalid, I gather. Maybe heart-trouble? Maybe using strychnine? Maybe missing a few tablets lately?"

Lieutenant MacDonald had never seen anyone wring her hands before, but there was no other description for what Mrs. Harnett was doing. "I have noticed," she struggled to say, "twice recently, I've had to have a prescription refilled before I needed to."

Steve gulped and set his glass down. "Hitting it too hard, Don," he choked out. "Minute in the bathroom. Then you can . . ." He gestured at the warrant.

"You must understand, Lieutenant," Mrs. Harnett began as Steve left. "It isn't as if my Stephen were like other men. This isn't an ordinary case. Of course I have to tell the truth when it comes to something like the strychnine, but —"

A dim fear clutched at Lieutenant MacDonald as he callously shoved past the old lady toward the bathroom. He threw open the unlatched door. Stephen Harnett stood there by the basin. MacDonald remembered McVeigh's description: *His hands are shaking and his eyes look like he's going to cry.* His trembling fingers were unable to bring the razor blade functionally close to the veins of his wrist. The blade slipped from his hand and clattered into the bowl as he turned and surrendered to the law.

"He'll never have to make another decision of his own," MacDonald said to Nick Noble when he dropped into the Chula Negra after his testimony on the first day of the trial. "From now on it's all up to his lawyers and the State. I think he likes it.

"Of course they've made that nonsensical double plea: *Not guilty* and *Not guilty by reason of insanity.* In other words, I didn't do it but if I did you can't hurt me. It may stick; I think he'll like it better if it doesn't."

"Is he?" Noble wondered into his glass.

"I don't know. What's sane? Like the majority of people? Then no murderer's sane: the majority aren't murderers. But the big trouble is with the people who are *almost* like the majority, the people you can't tell from anybody else till the push comes which they can't take. The people who could be the guy in the next apartment, the gal in the same bed . . . or me. So who's sane? Who's the majority? Maybe the majority is the people who haven't been pushed . . ."

Nick Noble opened his pale blue eyes to their widest. "You're growing up, Mac," he said, and finished his sherry hopefully.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Dan Sontup's "The Pipes Are Calling" is one of the eight "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Fifth Annual Contest. It is a story compounded of toughness and sentiment — the hallmarks of the hardboiled yarn, in the 'tec tradition of Hammett-Cain-Daly-Nebel-Chandler. But for a "first" story, it reveals unusual restraint, deep feeling, and despite its imitative source, considerable promise for the author.

And what about the author? Like most of the others who won special prizes for first stories, Dan Sontup is young, ambitious, has had a hard furrow to plow, and perhaps has an even harder field to cultivate in the future. At the time he submitted his story, Mr. Sontup was 27 years old; after graduation from high school in 1940, he worked as a grocery clerk, factory hand, and shoe salesman; he served thirty-nine months in the Army Air Forces, beginning as an aviation mechanic and ending up as an aerial gunner; a year ago he finished a delayed college education on the G.I. Bill of Rights, at Washington Square College, New York University, where he majored in magazine journalism.

Mr. Sontup has been writing since his public-school days. His sole "achievements" (the quotation marks are his own) in those early years were a batch of love poems to the blonde who sat behind him and a first prize in an eighth-grade essay contest. He began writing seriously in 1944, while still in the Army, and had collected about forty rejection slips by the time we accepted "The Pipes Are Calling." The only encouragement he ever got from a magazine, he tells us, came from EQMM.

The future? There is only one thing Mr. Sontup is sure of: he will keep on writing. Yes, Dan, keep on; let nothing discourage you — nothing this side of heaven.

THE PIPES ARE CALLING

by DAN SONTUP

I FOUND her in a small night club on the Post Road, just a little past Norwalk . . . She was standing next to an upright piano at the far end of the room, and she was dressed in a white gown that was cut low at the top and flared a lot at the bottom. She had one hand resting on top of

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the piano, and she was singing to the couples sitting in the shadowy darkness.

That gown did a lot for her. She knew white was her color, especially with her long black hair and her dark complexion. She hadn't changed much in the seven months since I had last seen her. She was still the kind of woman a man would do anything for — even murder.

I didn't know the name of the song she was singing — one of those slow, sentimental numbers that people quickly forget. She had the voice for it though — low and throaty.

She finished her song and there was a small spattering of applause, and then the clink of glasses and the hum of conversation grew louder.

She hadn't seen me come in and take a table in the corner. They had the tables arranged in sort of a big half-circle, with an aisle running from two sides of every table to the small clear space where the piano was. I was sitting facing her, right at the end of the middle aisle, and she could have looked straight down it to me — only she hadn't. She had been singing with her eyes staring off into the distance.

I was pretty much in the shadow there. The whole place was dimly lighted, and though the piano had the most light on it, even that was low and subdued. It was a strain on the eyes, but I guess it gave the place a sort of intimate atmosphere.

She was getting ready to sing her next number — and it was then that she saw me. She grabbed hold of the edge of the piano and leaned forward as if she were trying to make sure it was really me. She looked at me for a long time, and then she straightened up and turned and whispered to the fellow at the piano. He nodded his head and began to play the introduction to a song.

She clasped her hands together in front of her and stared straight at me without moving. She had always done it that way when she sang for me.

From the first chords of the introduction I knew what it was. I couldn't forget that easily. It had been a long time, and as soon as I heard her voice, I could see the whole thing again — all of it — right from the first time she sang that song to me, and to me alone.

Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling,
From glen to glen and down the mountain side . . .

The only pipes calling to me on that November night seven months before were police whistles — the same kind I used to blow when I was on the traffic detail. Only now they were blowing for me — Sergeant Dan Gordon, Safe and Loft Squad — and the sound of the whistles echoed and slammed against the buildings just off Times Square. For the first time in my life I knew what it felt like to be on the wrong end of a chase. I couldn't really blame anyone but myself, but I guess it was only a woman like

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Ellen who could make an honest cop turn killer.

It hadn't taken long to happen. The first time I saw her, I was working on a case and I had to ask her some questions. We were in her dressing room at Meegan's Club, and when we finished talking, she said why don't I stick around and hear her sing. I figured she was using the old technique of "being nice to the cop on the beat." But I didn't care. I was off duty then, through for the night, and I was tired enough to need a drink. I elbowed my way to the bar and watched her come out and stand in the spotlight in the center of the floor.

She knew my name — I had told it to her when I introduced myself as a police officer — and she turned and said something to the pianist, and then clasped her hands in front of her and looked straight at me and sang.

It's a pretty sad love song, and she sang it the way I liked it — soft and slow. I could feel her voice pulling at me, every word making me feel as if the song were just for me. I never thought that words and music could hit me that hard.

There were a lot of times after that when she sang for me — sometimes in the club with all those other people around, sometimes when there were only the two of us, and she would lock her hands in back of my head and brush her lips against my cheek and sing so low and soft that I could just about hear her.

Sure, I fell for her. It got so bad that I was even corny enough to keep telling her she was too sweet a kid to be singing in a dive — especially one run by Maxey Meegan. But she would only laugh and ask me why I thought that way about her, and that's where I was stuck. How can you give a woman a reason for something like that?

Then she would get serious and tell me that maybe soon things would work out all right and she would stop singing there. But when I tried to get her to quit right away, she would just say, "Soon, darling," and change the subject — sometimes just by putting her arms around my neck. I couldn't think straight when she did that.

I was supposed to be a detective. I was supposed to be able to watch the way people acted, listen to what they said, and then take all the facts and reason things out. But I couldn't do that where Ellen was concerned. It took a lot to make me see what I should have seen right away. I began to find things out that night I went to her apartment around four in the morning.

I had missed seeing her at the club because I had to work late on an emergency call. I phoned her and let her know, and she told me to come up when I was through for the night and she would have some sandwiches and coffee ready.

I could smell the coffee from the hall as I stepped out of the elevator. I was plenty tired, but all my tiredness went away when I got to her door and heard her crying inside. I almost

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dropped my key before I got the door unlocked and swung it wide open.

Maxey Meegan was standing in the center of the room holding Ellen by the shoulder with one hand and drawing his other hand back, getting ready to slap her. I could see the finger marks on her cheek from the slapping he had already given her.

I left the door open and was over to him in a couple of steps. I grabbed him by the arm, swung him around, and clouted him right between his mustache and his chin. He spun backwards and sat down hard on the floor.

I turned around and closed the door. That cooled me off a little, and I went over to Ellen. She put her head on my shoulder and cried so hard I could feel her whole body shaking against me.

Maxey sat on the floor holding his chin while the blood trickled over his lips and through his fingers. He had a very surprised look on his fat face. He must have known about Ellen and me — she worked at his club — but he probably hadn't figured on my breaking in on him.

"Okay, Meegan," I said, and I tried to keep my voice under control, "get up and start talking." I had to hold on tight to Ellen to keep from smacking him again.

He got up, wiped the blood off his chin with his handkerchief, and began to curse — slowly and without raising his voice.

I let go of her then and grabbed him by his shirt with one hand and backhanded him about four times with the other. I could feel my knuckles scraping against his teeth. I put all my strength into it and got a lot of blood on my hand, but it helped me work off that choked feeling in my chest.

He twisted out of my grip and went over and sat down on the sofa. He glared up at me, but didn't say anything.

Ellen came over to my side and put her hand on my arm. She had stopped crying and was dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. She looked at him, then back at me, and then took a deep breath.

"He's trying to blackmail me," she said.

Maxey looked very relieved. I guess he was glad that she had made the first move. I turned to Ellen, and it was a long while before she spoke.

"I was afraid I'd have to tell you some day, Danny. I guess it'll have to be now." She stopped and looked down at the floor before going on. "I did something very foolish when I was a kid. He's got the proof and he's been holding it over me."

"What is it?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Don't ask me — please. I made that one mistake and I'm paying for it now."

"It was quite a mistake, too," Maxey said, and he patted his breast pocket a couple of times.

I turned to Ellen again. "What does he want, money?"

"No."

"What?"

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"Me."

Maxey laughed. "Don't flatter yourself, baby." He was silent for a moment and then went on. "Maybe I did once, but not any more. I won't take you away from your boy friend. This is a much better deal. He's a cop, and as a business man, I can — uh — use a little police protection."

I knew what kind of protection he wanted. The Commissioner had been after us to close down some of Maxey's rackets. In fact, I had been on that very case when I first met Ellen. I took a step forward and stood over him.

He looked up at me, and for a moment there was a troubled look in his eyes. "Either that, or she goes to jail," he snapped.

Ellen gasped.

"No, Danny — no!"

I guess right then was when I stopped being a cop and became just another guy who was scared and desperate. All I knew was that he was hurting Ellen, and that I couldn't take much more of the fear in her voice.

I held out my hand to Maxey. "Let's have it," I said.

He grinned back at me.

I drew my revolver from its shoulder holster and pointed the barrel straight in his face. He stood up, and I stepped back to get some more room.

"Hand it over and get out of here," I said.

He grinned again. "You can't do that, Gordon. You're a cop. This is evidence, and you can't suppress it."

I took my badge out of my pocket and threw it on the floor.

"Hand it over," I said again.

He shook his head. He had nerve all right — or maybe he thought I wouldn't do anything and was just trying to throw a scare into him. "You had your chance, baby," he said to Ellen. "I'm turning this over to the police right now." He swung around to me. "And you can't make a blackmail rap stick, either. You've got no proof and no witnesses, and this" — he patted his breast pocket again — "well, this is evidence I just uncovered tonight, in case the police ask too many questions." He stepped past me and started for the door.

"Don't do it, Maxey," I said.

He laughed. "See you in court, sergeant." Then he stopped, and his face became serious. "You know, Gordon," he said, "I really ought to thank you for that shoving around you gave me. It helped me see a few things." He jerked his thumb at Ellen and turned around and faced her.

"Baby, I was really stuck on you. I wanted you so bad I was trying to blackmail you into it. But the funny part of it is that I decided to play it square tonight. I came here and tried to tell you how crazy I was about you, and then you had to laugh at me. You didn't even let me finish — you just laughed at me. Right then was when I started getting you out of my system, and your boy friend finished it off by slapping some sense into me. Can you imagine me coming here like a lovesick kid and figuring on asking

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you to marry me? And after I told you everything, I was going to give back all the stuff I had on you — the only copy left. What a sucker —"

He stopped suddenly when he realized what he had said. He looked at me and the troubled look came back into his eyes — only this time it stayed there.

The only copy! That wrapped up everything in one neat package. I knew Maxey was no amateur at blackmail, and I had been trying to figure out how to get the rest of the copies I was sure he had. This made things easy.

I dropped my gun and made a lunge for him, but he was too fast. He brought his knee up into my stomach and then slammed his fist in my face. I hit the floor and fell right on my gun. The hard metal of it jarred against my chest. I grabbed the gun and pointed it at him.

"Maxey!" I yelled.

He didn't stop, and I lay there while he started to walk out with Ellen's life — with our life — in his hands. He was reaching for the doorknob when I pulled the trigger. I shot him twice — in the back.

The summer's gone, and all the roses falling,
It's you, it's you must go, and I must bide . . .

I sent for her the next day, and we met late that afternoon in a cheap hotel room on Third Avenue. It was raining outside — cold and dark and windy. I opened the door for her and let her in. We didn't say anything, just stood there holding on to each other like a couple of frightened kids while the rain beat against the window.

There wasn't much time, so I let go of her and walked over and sat down on the bed and lit a cigarette. I hadn't put the lights on, and the room was filled with the same dreary dimness as the streets outside.

She came over and sat down next to me on the bed.

"The police give you much trouble?" I asked.

She shook her head. "They questioned me for hours and then let me go. I didn't tell them anything."

"See anyone follow you here?"

"No. I was very careful." She grabbed hold of my arm. "Oh, Danny, you shouldn't have run away."

I shrugged my shoulders. Sure, I could have stayed there. I was a police officer, and I had shot a man. I could have made up a good story about breaking in and finding him attacking Ellen. A struggle — he tries to make a run for it — I shoot him. All in the line of duty. There might have been a lot of trouble afterwards — demotion or suspension — but Ellen would have been in the clear. But it was too late for that now. When I tossed my badge away I must have thrown my common sense away with it.

She kept holding on to my arm. "I was afraid you didn't get away last

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night," she said. "I didn't know what happened to you."

"It wasn't hard," I said. "I've chased enough men myself to know all the tricks."

"Are you sure they know you did it?" she asked.

I tried to laugh. "After they found my badge in the apartment — and after I knocked over all those people on the way out? Besides, it was no big secret about you and me."

She nodded her head glumly. I reached into the inside pocket of my jacket and took out a long white envelope and showed it to her. It was still sealed.

"I took this off Maxey before I ran out," I said.

"I know. I saw you take it."

I waited a while — a long while — and then I crumpled the envelope in my hands and walked over to the sink in the corner and dropped the envelope in it. I struck a match and held the flame to all four corners of the envelope. The flame lit up the corner of the darkened room and made yellow shadows dance on the walls. I kept poking the burning papers and holding more lighted matches to them until there was only a fine, powdery black ash left. Then I turned on both faucets and watched the ashes swirl down the drain. I cleaned the sink with my hands.

Ellen hadn't said a word all this time, just stood there and watched. I turned to her and said, "I never want you to tell me what was in that envelope."

She took a quick breath — almost a gasp — and buried her head on my chest and started to cry. I let her cry herself out. When she was through, I made her wash her face, and that helped a lot. We went over and sat down on the bed again.

"I'm gonna have to leave town," I said.

"For long?"

"Can't tell. I may even have to leave the country."

"Danny," she said, "I want to go with you."

"You know you can't. I've got to travel alone now."

"I'll wait. You send for me, and I'll come."

"You sure, Ellen? It won't be easy, even if we do get away and in the clear."

"I'm sure, Danny."

"Okay," I said. "It'll take time, but we'll work it out. I'll send for you as soon as I can."

"Will you write to me?" she asked.

"I can't. It's too risky."

"Then how will I know what's happened to you — or where to meet you?"

"You found my message under your door, didn't you — telling you to meet me here?"

"Yes."

"Well, the fellow who put it there is an ex-convict that I once helped out. I had him sneak the message in and ring your bell when he was sure the police had left. He'll act as our go-between."

"Who is he?"

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"His name's Olaf. He's a tailor now and lives with his wife in back of their shop down on the East Side." I scribbled an address and a phone number on a piece of paper and gave it to her. "Memorize this before you leave here," I said.

"Can you trust him, Danny?"

"Sure. I stayed at his place last night. He knows the whole story. I got him his parole and helped set him up in business when he got out. He and his wife are a swell old couple, and they'll do all they can for us. You can trust them."

She nodded her head.

"But remember," I said, "you've got to be careful. If you ever have to call him, use a pay phone from a drug store. Don't ever go to his place unless it's very important — and then make sure you're not being followed. He's a parolee, and he's taking an extra risk by helping us out."

"I'll be careful," she said.

"He'll let you know when he hears from me. The police don't know that he and I are friends. But keep your eyes open. They'll probably watch every move you make from now on."

I stood up. "Got his address memorized yet?"

She repeated it for me, and I took the piece of paper from her and gave it the same treatment as the envelope.

"Let Olaf get in touch with you first," I said. "But if you have to leave town, let him know where you are. And now, you better be leaving. It's dangerous for you to stay here."

She stood up and came over to me. She had control of herself — no wild passion, no hysterics. Her kiss was warm and soft and tender and full of promise. I forgot everything then — about Maxey, about what I had done and what I was going to do. I forgot everything but the feel of her in my arms. "Take care of yourself, darling," she whispered.

I had trouble talking. "I will," I said.

She opened her purse and took out a roll of bills. "I almost forgot," she said. "I stopped in at the bank after I got your message. Here, you'll need this." She put the money in my hand and closed my fingers over it.

I dropped the bills in my pocket and drew my gun and went over to the door and opened it a crack and peeked out. Then I opened it a little more and stuck my head out and looked up and down the hallway. It was all clear, and I stepped back into the room and held the door open for her. She put her hand on my arm, hesitated for a moment while we looked at each other, and then she was gone.

But come ye back when summer's in the meadow,
Or when the valley's hushed and white with snow . . .

I came back because of the answer Olaf sent to my first and only letter.

I had been gone about five and a half months before I felt safe enough to risk a letter to him. I was out in California by then, and I wrote and

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told him to get in touch with Ellen and have her meet me in Frisco. I had a lot to say in the letter — I had to tell him how Ellen should make the trip so she could lose any police who might be following her, and I gave directions for how she should contact me after she arrived. But I did find room in it to ask Olaf to tell Ellen how much I missed her.

I mailed the letter and then waited, hoping that everything would go all right and that Ellen wouldn't get too scared at the way I looked now. Living in hobo jungles after my money had run out had made me lose about thirty pounds, and my face was thin and drawn. I coughed a lot, and sometimes, when it seemed like I couldn't stop coughing, I felt my insides tearing out.

For a month I heard nothing. Then I got a letter from Olaf. I picked it up under my assumed name at the General Delivery window at the post office and read it while I sat on one of the benches in front of the building.

It was a long letter, written in Olaf's big, scrawling handwriting, and I didn't want to believe any of it. The police had arrested Ellen and released her. He had tried to get in touch with her, but she had left town. She had not even tried to reach him and let him know where he could find her, and he couldn't take the risk of coming right out in the open and looking for her.

That was bad enough, but what made it even worse was that Ellen was now playing around with Maxey's successor, the one who was now running the old club. Their pictures had made the tabloids, and once, for just a few seconds, Olaf had seen them together in the city. She had been hanging on to his arm, smiling up at him.

Olaf tried to make it easy for me. He enclosed a hundred-dollar postal money order and told me to use the money to get out of the country and forget about Ellen.

I destroyed the letter, cashed the money order, and started walking. I did a lot of thinking, and it was late at night before I took my eyes off the ground long enough to realize where I was. I hitched a ride out of town within an hour.

It took me two weeks to get across the country, mostly by bumming rides. I hung on to as much of that hundred dollars as I could. I'd be needing it.

Olaf's wife opened the back door for me when I knocked. She looked at me without saying anything and held the door open for me to come in.

I walked in and sat down at the round table in the center of the room. She sat down opposite me. Her gray hair still had streaks of gold in it, and her round face, usually smiling, was without expression.

"Where's Olaf?" I asked.

"Gone. Police come and take him away."

I sat up straight. "Why?"

"Because he helped you. He tell them you have left the country."

"How did they find out about us?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

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"Did Olaf get rid of that letter I sent him?"

"He burned it."

I got up and walked over in back of her and put my hands on her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"Not your fault," she said.

"It was the girl, wasn't it?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

Like Olaf, she was trying to make it easy for me. But it couldn't have been anyone else but Ellen. She was the only one who knew about Olaf.

I didn't mind so much about myself. Maybe she had used me. Maybe she had figured that by tying up with me, she would have scared Maxey off. I didn't like to think that, but it made sense.

It wasn't hard to figure out what probably had happened. The boys of the Homicide Squad were a stubborn bunch. They had got their teeth into Maxey's murder and they had hung on and never let go. They had questioned and searched and poked around until they must have dug up what Maxey had found out about Ellen, and that was why they arrested her. That also made sense — and besides, it was what I wanted to believe.

I could understand the police holding the past over Ellen's head and scaring her until she agreed to turn against me. That was not much better than what Maxey had done, only this time it would be legal blackmail.

I could take what she had done to me. I was the only one she hurt by that, and it didn't matter any more. But I couldn't take what she had done to Olaf and his wife. Olaf's wife — the one who always used to laugh and joke with me and never stop thanking me for what I had done to help them out — I had to sit there now and look at her with her hands folded in front of her on the table and that deadpan expression on her face.

"Where is she?" I asked finally.

"Better you leave here, Danny. Go away and forget."

"I have to find her, Mom. I've got to make sure. Where is she?"

She sighed. "I don't know. Olaf said he see her once in town with her new fellow, but she doesn't stay here. Before the police come, Olaf tell me he find out she works in Connecticut — on the Post Road. She sings in a road house."

"That all you know?"

She nodded her head.

I went to the door.

She got up and followed me. "Be careful, Danny. She's not worth it."

I rumpled her hair — the way I used to — and then opened the door and walked out.

It was a little after five in the evening, and I walked a few blocks and then caught a cab to Grand Central. I got in the center of a bunch of commuters and let myself be pushed into the New Haven Express.

I got off at Stamford, walked around the streets for a while, and then went in and rented a car. The hundred dollars was almost gone.

I drove the short distance back to the state line and then started back

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on the Post Road. I drove slowly, checking every likely-looking tavern and every road house on the way.

I found her at eleven that night in the twenty-third place I tried.

It's I'll be here in sunshine or in shadow,
Oh, Danny boy, oh, Danny boy, I love you so . . .

Maybe she did love me — once. I tried to keep thinking that while I sat in the dimness and listened to her sing to me. It was the first time that I didn't give her my full attention, but that was because she wasn't singing only for me this time.

While she was singing, I noticed her glancing at a table against the wall. Two men were sitting there. I didn't know them, but it was easy to tell who they were. They were police — and the song was a signal to them that I had shown up. I could see them looking around when she started singing. They knew I was in there, and it wouldn't take them long to spot me.

I saw her glance at another table. There was a man sitting there alone, but there were two drinks in front of him. I knew him. He was Maxey's old lieutenant, the new owner of the club in the city, and the one who had taken Ellen from me. I wondered if she was singing to him also.

She finished the song and held out her arms to me and smiled, a sort of hesitating smile. Then she started walking down the aisle toward me. She was not only putting the finger on me, she was using her whole body to point me out.

I saw the two detectives get up. One of them started to follow in back of her. The other circled the wall and headed for the entrance to block my way, in case I made a run for it. First Olaf — and now me.

Well, at least she had sung for me again — only this time the song didn't mean the same. It used to be that the song was just for the two of us and for no one else. When she sang, it wasn't just the words of a song to me — it was her telling me how much she loved me. Now it was something else. The song was still just for the two of us, but it told a different story. We might even have seen a kind of prophecy in the song long before everything happened.

She hadn't bothered to sing the second verse. If she had, she could have seen another prophecy in the first two lines — one that would tell her what was going to happen now — to the both of us. It was better that way. Let her keep walking to me, smiling and not knowing.

She was almost at my table, and the detectives were closing in fast. There wasn't much time. I stayed seated and put my hand in my jacket pocket. I slipped the safety catch on my police revolver, and I thought of the two lines she didn't sing —

But when ye come, and all the flow'rs are dying,
If I am dead, as dead I well may be. . . .

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THE MONSTER

by VINCENT CORNIER

WITHIN the sea-fret and the bone-biting cold of that January afternoon a mound grew under the nervous patting of a sexton's spade — a grave newly filled in the churchyard of Kilshaven-on-Sea, in Westmorland, England.

The sexton was manifestly frightened by his task. He scanned outlying fields for the slim comfort of but one sight of his fellowmen. These were few enough. No more than seven mourners had attended the service of burial. When the final straggler was gone from ken, the sexton flung his spade aside with a curse. Eager to be away from the site, he scattered on the mound those few pitiful flowers mankind had vended, as it were, in payment for the entertainment and satisfaction provided . . . certainly not carried to the grave in grief or tribute.

Chiefest among the offerings was a knot of expensive double tiger-lilies. Someone, in a ghoulish and freakish humor, had left them — someone who knew, and laughed because he knew. For the blooms were tied together with a blood-red riband and a card upon them bore the words: "*Mine, saith the Lord.*"

So was enacted the last episode in that enormous mystery known in criminological annals as "The Great Travers Case." So there passed, by ecclesiastical and civil and legal procedures and ceremonies, the clay that triumphed over civilized codes of Law.

The dead that lay there *had* so triumphed. In life and being, it had murdered again and again, and the Law and all its officers knew precisely of the guilts. Yet, officers could not hold, Law could not condemn.

I think Barnabas Hildreth summed up the position when, toward the close of the case, he addressed us on his findings and his problems. In that august company (myself dragged in, bleakly and baldly described on my official voucher as "Geoffrey Ingram, Newspaper Editor: *DAILY POST*, London") I was abashed — not so much by its majesty, as by Barny's cool behavior. There were the Lord Chief Justice, the Lord Chancellor, the Public Prosecutor, and four learned judges, Lords of Appeal, as well as representatives from Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament and a scintillating company of the greatest minds contained in Scotland Yard — and one would, really, have deemed him as talking pleasantly to a gathering of undergraduates.

"My lords and gentlemen," he murmured, "there is the position declared and stated. I have given you incontestable proof that this man is the mass-murderer sought for so long.

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There isn't a vestige of doubt about his guilt — that is completely proved.

"Yet, as you are agreed and aware, he can laugh at us and all we represent. There is nothing to prevent his going out tonight — or any other day or night — to commit the crime of felonious killing, again and again.

"No officer of the Law has legal warrant to arrest him. If arrested and detained in custody, why then — as you, my lords and gentlemen, have admitted — a writ of *habeas corpus* is made operative and delivers him from jail. The supreme irony lies in the fact that the Law itself, overriding and irrespective of any private citizen's prayer or proceeding, must issue and implement that writ!

"This murderer could, if he wished, in his diseased vanity and criminal arrogance — if he condescended — if he deigned — submit his person to trial.

"Assuming he did so, he would be found guilty and sentenced to death. And what would inevitably follow? By the selfsame paradox that forces the Law to protect him from itself, as by writ of *habeas corpus*, by the consummate operation of civilized codes of justice, his condemnation and sentence would immediately be quashed: rendered null and void.

"The Judge who pronounced sentence of death by judicial hanging would then have to order the officers of the Court to release their prisoner and he would walk out of the felon's dock a free man . . . still Law's master!"

There it was: in that cold clay within that lonely grave lay buried the one possible annihilator of all the process of civilized Law. In that happily interred clay had been fashioned The Perfect Murderer.

"Perfect," inasmuch as he had been at liberty, always, to kill fellowmen and women, to murder at will and whim, fully aware that one loophole, never foreseen as such by any legislator, permitted him to escape all consequences of his crimes.

However, crypticisms must be ended. Allow me to give you the full story as it exists, scrupulously recorded from Alpha to Omega, by Barnabas Hildreth of His Britannic Majesty's Intelligence. . . .

Early in 1924, Marion, wife of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Sommeran Travers, of Great Travers in the County of Westmorland, was delivered — according to Registry records — of twin sons. The circumstances of the births were remarkable.

One twin was born at eight p.m. on the evening of February the tenth, in the house of Great Travers. Complications arose; the mother was removed by County Authorities' ambulance service to the private nursing home run by Dr. Pentony Hedley, at his home, in Kilshaven-on-Sea. In the home, at approximately one o'clock — seventeen hours after the first birth — the second delivery was accomplished "with grave difficulty" (Hedley's recorded testimony at the time).

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The prior twin, and heir to the immensely wealthy Travers estate, was named Albert Sommeran. The later twin was christened Charles Hector. Within an hour of her second travail, Mrs. Travers died.

The husband — up to this time a man of cold and reserved, even taciturn and formidable, bearing — was crushed by his grief. To the alarm of people who had known him all his life, his character swiftly degenerated. He was distraught . . . "sometimes no more than a gibbering raving maniac," according, also, to contemporary testimony.

Dr. Hedley, a lifelong friend, sympathetically conducted certain business. He saw to funeral arrangements and to the registrations of the births. No one could have been more helpful to that distracted near-millionaire, Lieutenant-Colonel Travers. Malice whispered that, actually, Hedley remained "cold sober for a whole week."

Indeed, the doctor went to extraordinary lengths for his friend. The prior twin was removed from Great Travers and brought to the Nursing Home. A special ward was set aside; Hedley's housekeeper (hitherto regarded by local folk as "being no better'n she should be: a flaunting bit of goods") also suffered a sea-change into something rare and strange. Overnight, almost, she became a dragon of circumstance — a staid, immutable, stand-no-nonsense Nanny. The children remained completely in her care.

More than these odd things, Dr. Pentony Hedley assumed paramount influence over Travers. He closed Great Travers, except for the Dower House, discharged servants and retained only three. These were the butler, a grave soul maligned by the fateful name of Belch, Miss Beryl Honiston, and Ikey Sallars. "Daft Ikey" was the dumb-numb son of an estate worker whose life Charles Travers had saved in the First World War. In the manner of those, ninepence-to-the-shilling, young Isaac Sallars lent and bent his mighty body to a whole life's adoration of the Travers' clan — and would have died for any one of them on the drop of a hat.

Lieutenant-Colonel Travers remained in the Hedley Nursing Home, under treatment. Proof existed to show he was pitifully broken. He was heard, lamentably for such a man, alternately sobbing and laughing in hysteria — across weeks. The good Dr. Hedley, true administrator of his Hippocratic Oath, did all he could, even to keeping Travers under the semi-influence of sedative drugs.

The County called. Social etiquette required to see "poor Marion's babies — so tragic — wasn't it, dear?"

The County saw the children. The County never touched them. The newly omnipotent housekeeper-*cum*-Nanny, Mrs. Crawthorne, stood in Gorgon guard.

There the infants lay, side by side in their lovely cot, and Society inspected, as allowed. Mrs. Crawthorne could not be defied, either. Lieutenant-Colonel Travers gave it generally

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to be understood that she was acting on his direct orders . . . he "wasn't going to have the brats chewed and tewed about by a gang of slobbering women — the damned things had cost him enough, as it was."

The children were talked about. There was reason. One twin — that given the name of Albert Sommeran — was a normal wee creature. He dribbled and chuckled and waved fat impotent arms and kicked delightfully. Alongside him — identical in every feature, yet entirely different — lay something cast in olden evil.

No baby, this. It lay there, its cold and malevolent eyes steadily regarding the passing show. Its hands remained still. It never kicked. It was as though there existed within that small and dimpled flesh an adult spirit, monstrous and malignant.

Now all appeared most plain. Abashed womenfolk went away and whispered — genuinely shocked.

"No wonder poor Charles has gone to rot. Marion's twins — oh, my dear, one's a — a monster. Yes, positively, a . . . *monster!*"

In that small community of Kilshaven, the Travers family had always been arbiters of prosperity — owners of every square inch of land and all buildings. When it was realized that the surest way to disfavor was to show undue interest in the twins, or to run a whispering campaign about them, a defensive and curious *taboo* came into existence. The children were ignored; at first, awkwardly — later, smoothly.

Yet, in their earliest years, whenever Mrs. Crawthorne trundled them through the lanes in their big perambulator, interest was avid, if discreet. The remarkable disparity in the natures of the twins kept it so. Young Albert jollied and *ga-ga-goo-ed* every passerby. Hector watched them, basilisk, as a snake glinting at prey. Superstitious fishermen, meeting his gaze, would not put to sea during that day. A wandering gipsy tinker saw him, gasped, made the mark of his pattern — and his caravan was twenty miles away to south by nightfall.

Such a position could not remain constant. Travers, a morose and graying man, attended to that.

He stopped the children moving abroad. The grounds of Great Travers were wide and secluded; within them, from the age of two, the twins were contained. Travers himself, looked after by Belch and Miss Honiston and Mrs. Crawthorne, tenanted the Dower House. Daft Ikey, now grown heavily in bone and muscle, was an effective guard. Travers — or Dr. Hedley; no one could say for certain, since Hedley had given up his practice and was now Estate Steward and intimate friend of the Master — also began to breed dogs. Mastiffs of olden shape and ferocity were often loose in the Great Travers acres.

The outside staff gone with the other servants, the grounds began to verge on wilderness. Travers — or, again, the good Hedley — encouraged so much. Indeed, in the third year of

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the children's lives, barbed wire went up and electrified fences were erected. All surrounding walls were built up and repaired. In short, Great Travers became a virtual stronghold.

All for two small brats . . . two tiny bairns, barely toddlers . . .

And what odd toddlers they were. A village boy, after apples, first watched them walking abroad. He reported what he saw.

"Like a pair o' bloomin' pansies," he snorted. "Cuddling like a coupla lasses: shy as hares." The boy's father lost his cottage and his job that night, and no more village boys raided Great Travers orchards.

As the years passed, Dr. Hedley, still in his vicariously wealthy ascendancy — but no more the half-tipsy fellow of former medical days — sat down to a problem. The boys were in need of schooling and it was apparent that the Colonel was breaking up — rapidly.

Relaxations were permitted, as by imperial decree. The whole odd and gossip-provoking state of affairs was ameliorated. Life in the village became less furtive: a sigh of relief went up and relations between the House and the rustics sensibly improved.

For young Albert began his lessons. He took to trotting down to the vicar, with whom he studied the elements of Greek and Latin — surprising that venerable man by his command of the three R's and general knowledge. The village folk warmed to the Travers' heir — he was a lovable rascal, and could hold his own with most on-comers of his own age and weight.

The essential difference between the twins was now less noteworthy. Hector had lost much of his former evil "aura." He differed from Albert only in being silent, in looking sidelong, where Albert looked straightly — and by the physical points of having one front tooth missing, and his hair parted in the middle, slicked down, where Albert's mop went awry, "ladlike." Hector was self-contained, as self-contained as a sting in a wasp. He stayed at the Dower House for his lessons, it being understood that Dr. Hedley "had him in hand."

A change came, too, in Lieutenant-Colonel Travers. He began to pick up old threads and friendships. Once again he was seen at Fell Sports and sheepdog trials, at local races and occasionally at the bigger race meetings. Although he gave it most plainly to be understood that the time-hallowed Lengdale Hunt could no longer meet in Great Travers' grounds, he fox-hunted now and then and even attended Hunt suppers and the annual Ball.

As for Dr. Hedley, he surprised the locals by a sudden sporting of a Rolls-Bentley car, then by a flamboyant marriage with the redoubtable, but svelte and physically handsome, Mrs. Crawthorne.

So the pleasanter and more normal years passed — prior to the swift small tragedies that were to be the prelude of that long disaster which led to the compilation of world-renowned *dos-*

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siers entitled in a dozen different languages: "The Great Travers Case Papers."

In early 1935 a hen was found in a roadway near the wall of Great Travers. It was feebly alive, but it had been hobbled by a length of string and eviscerated by a rough incision from its breastbone to vent. In June of that year a puppy was found — almost on the identical site of the former "find" — dying. It, too, had been roughly disemboweled. During November of that year, when boys of the village were letting off fireworks, a twisting and curiously bouncing ball of fire appeared to shoot along the roadway bounding the Great Travers park wall. It was found to have been a cat — a cat that had been soaked in petrol, ignited, and sent to run to its agonized death — in "sport."

A sullen tongue seemed to speak. Ominously it crept through the village and sounded its echoes on the threshhold of the Dower House. For some considerable while neither Lieutenant-Colonel Travers nor Dr. Pentony Hedley was seen. Then, curiously, it was announced that Master Hector Travers was going to a new type of school, near Vienna.

And the new doctor in Kilshaven (probably embittered a little by the knowledge that the Travers family never acknowledged his professional or social existence) suavely mentioned to the bank manager — who mentioned it to the Chapel people — who, emboldened by the sources of the knowledge, loudly proclaimed it up and down the farming valley that a school for psychiatric treatment of boys existed near Vienna. Who could doubt, now, that the three terrible acts of cruelty were those of Master Hector Travers, who was being sent, in good old-fashioned way, out of his country for his country's good?

His brother gone, ten days later the open-faced heir of Great Travers went to his own public school. And the village, beaming and waving, saw him off in benevolent style and manner.

Yet, with both boys away, another cat was found in snow, outside the Travers' land. Its throat had been cut and its eyes gouged out. . . .

Charles Hector Travers was submerged in the Nazi tide. After war broke out, he was missing. International Red Cross inquiries were made: no record of the youth could be found. Rumor, and not reliable, had it that the scholars of the Wiedlingau Wurtzbactal psychopathic school, where Hector had gone, had been "eliminated." Other rumors had it that a few survivors, two of them English, were held in a concentration camp in the Province of Carniola, Lower Austria. When and if definite information came to hand, the family would be advised through Headquarters, at Berne, in Switzerland. No information ever proceeded.

Hector was in Europe, obliterated. Albert was a prefect at a famous Public School — his comings and go-

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ings were regularly marked and known. Still the animal-mayhem and killing went on. No fewer than six other instances occurred from 1935 to 1942.

Daft Ikey was, for a time, held suspect. But the police were vigilant and scrupulous; their admirable work proved Daft Ikey innocent. Police officers had followed a sage procession of thought. Considering the unhealthy phenomena of the animal torturings as minor steps upon one road, they grimly awaited major manifestations.

In October 1943 all that the police had feared came.

A girl was murdered on the boundary road, not sixty yards from the main gate of Great Travers. Fragments of her clothing, tufts and tendrils of hair and two broken teeth, were picked up over a circle of twenty-five yards in diameter. Naked, she lay in a wet ditch. An exaggeratedly uniformed W.A.A.F., buxom, swaggering, and ashen-haired, she had been attractive: a "regular man's woman." She had been vastly addicted to "ladding" but vaunted she could "always take care of herself." On this last occasion of her life she had evidently not been able to do so — although she appeared to have fought viciously.

Apparently it had taken two men to subjugate her. All around her and about, intermingled, overlapping, heeling, toeing, scraping — were the marks of two heavily shod pairs of feet. Eminent C.I.D. crime-experts reconstructed the fight. With two dissentients only from a team of ten, eight of the senior Scotland Yard officers agreed that two men had attacked, then one man had tried to prevent his companion from committing the ultimate murderous and unmentionable acts.

Those feet marks tended to make hay of the local police "expectations." They were Number Eight boots, incontestably of recent War Department Army-issue. One pair had lacked half a heel-plate on the right foot, the other pair had a "cobbler's break" among its left foot nails and a distinctive row of addled hobs on the inner edge.

Daft Isaac Sallars was proved to be at a chapel choir practice during the time of the crime. Dr. Hedley and Lieutenant-Colonel Travers were at a Masonic dinner. Albert Sommeran Travers was proved to have been two hundred miles away, to the south, continuously observed by seven masters and fully one hundred fellow schoolmen. Alibis accepted.

Inquiries were fierce and painstaking. They took all of seventeen days to complete but, at last, the movements of every living soul in Kilshaven-on-Sea were checked and recorded. No process of elimination was possible — no definite suspect was arrived at.

The case of the murdered W.A.A.F. was closed.

Now it came to pass that early in March of the following year a Nazi

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prisoner-of-war, one Franz Neuerbacher, grew very weary of looking through barbed wire at the Roman stones of Hadrian's Wall, dividing England from Caledonia stern and wild. He got his fat little body out of camp and walked southwards. He kept to mountaintops, to moors and in white acreages of mist, and it was six weeks before he descended into the lonely loveliness of Westmorland, to creep on sea beaches and to confer with Fate on the subject of escape by the great waters of the Atlantic shore.

So the good soldier Franz came to wander at nights in what appeared and appealed to him as an especially ordained sanctuary — the vast parklands of Great Travers. Fat pheasants tamely walked into his simple Nazi snares; heavy rabbits were so numerous and easy to kill, he had surfeit.

But — most unfortunate Franz — one evening a large mastiff trod silently and terribly upon him and chewed some pieces out of his fundamental being. A limping and shambling fellow — Daft Ikey — withdrew the mastiff and saw to Franz being taken, lamenting powerfully, to the hospital. Cauterizing, stitching, and grafting were undertaken, and great was the commotion thereof.

Yet, Franz perked up after a while. Few could resist his tubby impudence and his genial garrulity. In very good English he kept on chattering to the busy nurses gliding past — until that night when he chanced to mention the funny affair of the two men and the leveret and thus sowed a whirlwind that criminological history was to reap.

For, in that hour, a woman from Kilshaven, a young and handsome wife, walked along the May darkness of the road bounding Great Travers. Something came to her — and shortly afterwards she died. Her screams, as this "something" came, aroused the night for a mile all ways. Men came running, police whistles shrilled, and the place was in a turmoil from sea to hills.

But all was too late. Her life was ebbing when they reached her. There in the darkness, under the fresh springing of the year, her body, white and red to the waist, writhed feebly.

". . . That Hector it was — him what was supposed to — to have went into yon concentration camp . . . he done it. . . . He knifed me." She sobbed and gurgled, her strength going. "Oh, God, if — if only his brother had done more — if — if he'd tried harder . . . he might ha' gotten him offen me . . ."

"Ella — Ella — Mrs. Wagstaffe, can you hear me?" The local police sergeant shook her there. "For the Lord's sake, Ella me girl, tell us . . . try to tell us! What brother — did what — *how?*"

Her eyes looked up to light for the last time.

"Albert — allus a good lad, was young Master Albert — he tried to — to pull the dirty evil toad away like — but no, yon, — yon swine were too mad strong to be stopped by anyone . . . mad . . ." So she died.

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Later that night a serious group of police officers surrounded Franz Neuerbacher's bed — which, for reasons of privacy, had been run into a side-ward. Franz was given the first cigar he had enjoyed in England, and was asked to repeat, and amplify, the tale about the men in the park of Great Travers, one of whom found a little leveret in the grass.

"*Ja* — and this I saw *mit* mine eyes. I in some tree-bushes hiding vos. Dey two, mit arms about each odder, silly like der young girls valk, to me came. I vos in — vat you say — *ein* helluva muck-sweat — ja!"

Across from these laurels in which Neuerbacher was hiding was — said he — a small sanded roadway, then a triangular swathe of grass. Behind the grass patch a small tower with round holes in it — "not windows, even" — was situated. Rhododendron clumps, with spears of flower already showing, flanked the position. The two men, walking together, came from behind this little empty ruin. They were talking — or, at least, one talked, "in a *fraulein's* manner," the other, grossly masculine, spoke filthy interjections, curses, occasionally snarling fragments of sentences and oaths.

As they walked, a little squeal was heard. The dirty-mouthed one chuckled, horribly, stooped, and picked up a shivering wee hare which had wandered from its nest. The man had trodden on it in the grass.

Franz Neuerbacher stuttered and paused . . .

"Yes, go on," prompted an officer. "A tiny leveret — what next?"

"Ah! *Es shrecklich* vas! Dat filthy man — he squveeze it *und* squveeze it — and it died. He laugh. *Der* odder man, he cry — *ja*."

Then, the masculine one, laughing at his companion's distress and distaste, put the head of the leveret in his mouth, bit the neck, and "snarling as do dogs snarl," severed the head.

"*Ugh!* That ended the episode?"

"Nein! *Lieber Gott — nein!* I a soldier am, but in mine home, I two dearest children haff, und a *Frau* that I loff." The little prisoner of the war sat up and looked a man. "I — I am not filth. Dis man — he was filth. Like der Sultan ven he kiss Hassan, in der great play, ven der loffers he haff killed — dis man, he kissed der odder. Der blood vas on der cheeks of him vot cried, like *frauleins* cry. Den, arms around each odder . . . dey valked avay, back by der liddle house mit the holes in — *ja*."

"Tell us, Neuerbacher, these two men — if there was light enough to see all this, there was light enough for you to have received other impressions — were they very much alike? Would you go so far as to say, for instance, they were twins?"

"*Ja!*" Neuerbacher waved his cigar, emphatically. "They were twin brudders. Dey dressed alike, dere faces vos alike. Excep' dat von a *schwein* looked, an' der odder — a saint from God's holiest heaven. *Ach, Gott*, how great an angel-look had dat von: him vot vept!"

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He had no more of value to tell, but he had earned his moment and his fat cigar.

Proof was speedily obtained — that this statement was fantastic, unreliable, and misleading to the verge of frenzy.

Albert Travers was certainly in the district. Sinus trouble had been keeping him home from college. But for an hour prior to the murder, during its accomplishment, and up to the time when the vengeful and grief-stricken Police Sergeant Knaggs (who had known Ella Wagstaffe from babyhood) stamped up the steps of the house to question him, Albert had been in the Vicarage of St. Botulph's, in Kilshaven-on-Sea.

There he sat quietly, playing bridge, with the Reverend Mr. Bendilowe, Mrs. Bendilowe, and Janetta their only — and very lovely — daughter. That these three people had, or could have, entered some deep connivance to shield young Travers was completely discountenanced.

But the lad was disturbed — enormously distressed and disturbed. The Reverend Mr. Bendilowe had seen many a writhing face, transparent before the darkness and despair of broken soul: he felt he was looking through such a window now.

His serene eyes were gentle in their regard of Albert Travers. The boy looked at him, alone, and broke down. He collapsed and held his shaggy head in his arms and rocked without words being spoken. Gently, the Bishop laid a hand on his head . . .

Shortly afterwards, senior C. I. D. officers broke the odd sanctuary of Dower House for the first time in years. For two hours, his calm visibly shaken, Lieutenant-Colonel Travers talked and answered questions from all sides. He knew nothing about this tale of a living Hector. He produced the correspondence which had passed between him and the International Red Cross, located in Berne. Perusal of the manifestly genuine documents satisfied even the hawkish chief detectives. Mrs. Wagstaffe must have been suffering from hallucinations of the dying . . . definitely, this fellow Hector must be presumed dead.

Three days passed before Chief Detective Inspector Feversham again visited Great Travers. This time he came in an ambulance. With him, in a wheel chair, accompanied by a guard, was a fat and jolly little German, by name Franz Neuerbacher.

Feversham wanted to search the grounds of Great Travers — at least, to inspect one area of them. "Ah, yes," said Lieutenant-Colonel Travers, "let me ring my Steward."

Dr. Pentony Hedley came across from the Estates' Office and joined the party. What was the trouble? How might he help? Feversham told Hedley that the German had talked about a certain place in the grounds where he had seen two strangely behaving men. A small cylindrical stone house, or ruin of something, with grass in front of it.

"I know the place — I know the very place!" Hedley was all beams

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and fuss; Feversham thought he was too many beams and too much fuss, but he waited to find out what might follow. Dr. Hedley laughed delightedly. "*Grass*, you said?" And his voice suddenly grew cold and shrewdly pointed with inquiry. "Sure it was — grass?"

Sneeringly, Dr. Hedley took them to a ruin. It was a blockhouse erected in the Seventeenth Century, during the Civil Wars, to guard the approach to Great Travers. Two ports for culverin fire were in the crumbling wall; its thick limestone cylinder was half-covered by ivy. Rhododendrons flanked it — the sanded road was before it, the laurels edged the road . . . but of grass there was none. Where Neuerbacher said it grew, nothing but a spanse of cobblestones was to be seen.

"*Aber — aber das geht lieder nicht!*" Franz gasped.

"Use English, man." Feversham was sullen. "This fits your description to a T — but where the heck's the lawn you talked about?"

The prisoner pointed to the pavement. "Wie long haff dat been dere?" he inquired.

"'Bout three hundred years," Hedley replied.

The case of Ella Wagstaffe — the incident of the men with the leveret — *all* — rested.

Barnabas Hildreth had sweated for all of a month on The Great Travers Case, before he was accorded official permission to act in it. Police, of course, had no *locus standi:* he was a Service officer, of Intelligence, on the secrets' branch.

He not only sweated; in that grim and crow-like patience of his he sat on the affair. He located his lean body in the Seven Stars Inn, at Kilshaven-on-Sea, rattled a typewriter, pretended to be an author, and flooded the locals with good liquor. Eventually, knowing I had a spare weekend, he wired me to join him.

"Geoffrey," and he was luminous, cock-a-hoop, and tremulous — sure sign that all was well — "I've unearthed the biggest story that scandalous rag of yours will ever print — short of an exclusive on Gabriel's views on the Doomsday crowds."

"You're not going to tell me you've solved the Travers' case —"

"Solved it? *Solved it?*" His laugh was grating. His bony finger flickered, airily, arrogantly. "Good God, man, I solved it long ago! I divined exactly the 'how' of it all before I left Town. I'm here — merely to tie the knots."

The incredible fellow! Had I not known, as once I recorded, "Barnabas Hildreth was the one man who said precisely what he meant, and no more — ever — and no less," I should have left him there and then.

The landlord poked his head in our room. Hildreth, he said, was wanted on the 'phone. When he returned, his eyes were richly and darkly excited, his lips pallid. He shuddered, peculiarly, and I noticed his nostrils dilating. His right fist thumped into his left palm.

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"Come on, Geoff!" He swooped, rather than drank, his tankard dry. "To think of it, Geoffrey old friend, I've located one *Herr Professor* von Keitelbaum. A sprig of the Germano-Austrian nobility, once; a pseudo-scientist and a charlatan, later. He's a prisoner-of-war in Southern Italy." Hildreth paused, and the Ancient Mariner walked through his eyes and made me Wedding Guest. "Keitelbaum ran a cockeyed, naughty-boy clinic at Wiedlingau-Wurtzbactal, just outside Vienna. *And* — Keitelbaum never had — or ever knew — or ever heard of — anyone called Charles Hector Travers!"

"*Never?* But —"

"Why should he?" Hildreth grew immensely bland. "*Since no such child ever existed.*"

Boots began to forge the chain. Hildreth had talked to Daft Ikey — and Hildreth had been impressed by Ikey's speckless boots. Using a Home Office warrant, he then began to fiddle around the Great Travers Dower House. And in an old harness room, among other glittering leatherworks, Hildreth picked up and examined seven pairs of the dumb-wit's boots. All were size eight. All were War Department issue. All were ebon in brilliance — even the under-sole instep-bridge a-shine. And three pairs had a roughly added extra row of studding on the left foot.

"He'd hammered 'em there. He limps, somewhat; they prevent uneven wear," Hildreth said. "As so many of the half-baked do, Daft Ikey spent hours and loving hours on polishing leather and boots in particular: even collected them, by buying and barter, from everywhere."

"The boots of that W.A.A.F. murder showed —"

"Yes, similar row-studdings. Probably the girl's killer wore such boots — Ikey's boots."

"But, Ikey Sallars had an alibi."

"Alibis — alibis — *alibis!* The whole lot of you, police and all, have always been obsessed by alibis!"

Hildreth left the subject of boots. In a deliberated tangent he referred back to 1924 and the new-born twins.

Why should people see them, but not touch them? Why the sudden ascendancy of the drunken doctor and his mistress? Why the acquiescent vassalage of the rich Travers — he, with all his circumstance and power? What was there to hide? Was it feasible that a wee bundle of humanity, however malevolent of mien, could frighten so?

"Poppycock!" Hildreth snapped. "The real secret was too vast for common mention."

He said — and, scrupulously, he took each point in order — that the villagers had seen Albert and Hector, as growing boys, walking separately at different times. No one, with one early exception, had seen them walking together. The exception was the boy who stole apples — and talked of what he saw. He, and all his house, suffered for that talk: and Hildreth, across the years, remembered.

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Only in helpless babyhood were the twins seen as a pair. Ever afterwards . . . Albert Sommeran Travers fearfully, scrupulously, maybe reluctantly, schooled in a part — played "Hector."

I stuttered before the statement.

"Quite simple. Quite logical for acceptance. Quite — *certain*. Merely an alteration of 'hair-do,' the removal of a one-tooth denture — a silent attitude and a sidelong looking and — presto — the act was perfect!"

"Good God! *No*, I simply can't get it all! Tell me, when Hector left for Vienna —"

"Hector didn't leave for anywhere. Passports and visas, assuredly, were obtained in such an identity and name. Verified. Albert merely aped 'Hector,' went away with Hedley, as if to Vienna. That was all. Albert then put back his one false tooth, washed the fixative from his hair, stopped being a film-prodigy-bad-lad, became his normal self, and sneaked back to the Dower House. Ten days later, in proper person, he went to his public school."

"The — the Red Cross inquiries?"

"Part, and a brilliant part, of the whole set-up. Dr. Pentony Hedley made Conan Doyle's Doctor Moriarty look like a puling amateur! That chap's slipped up, only on one point, in twenty years. He lost that one — I took it, or, to be accurate, a low-flying Lysander photographic-aircraft took it for me a couple of days ago."

"What d'you mean?"

He chuckled. "Oh, I looked at some old district maps, then had aerial photographs shot; over the grounds of Great Travers." He paused. "The point Hedley lost was when he got rattled by Franz Neuerbacher's talk of the leveret and the grass. One moment he was all fuss and beams — the next, as Feversham reported, he was angry, red-faced, and a bully." He looked at me and laughed. "Geoff, there are *two* roundhouses in the Great Travers park: one at the eastern approach, one at the western. The one with cobblestone pavement is the eastern one — Neuerbacher saw what he saw on the grass swathe of the house to the west. As is common in these huge English country houses, symmetry is god. Landscape gardeners toiled to make each roundhouse a replica of the other . . . excepting, always, the grass."

I took the full implication, now. Hedley had had something to hide. Neuerbacher *had* seen those men do the things he said they did. I said so.

"Correct! And after Ikey's boots, that pretty well cooks all the geese. No doubt about it, Pentony Hedley is the evil genius there. And" — he warned — "if you jump your fences again and bleat 'alibi,' I'll fetch you a fourpenny one under the jaw, m'boy!"

Hildreth explained until my mind reeled. Yet, in essence — as I am bound by my craft to reduce it — all was so fantastically simple . . .

Something unmentionable occurred in Mrs. Travers' travail. Something

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was delivered into the world, so monstrous as to wreck her husband's whole life and alter his every habit. So monstrous, indeed, as to prompt the wily Hedley to a golden adventure in opportunism. He took command. He used drugs to weaken Travers. He imposed — and his will became law.

Everything possible was done to confine and encompass this evil and abnormal living thing that had issued from the woman who died in giving it birth. It — the "Thing" as Hildreth called it — was given the wide and luxurious prison of Great Travers. Faithful servants dedicated their lives to its concealment and maintenance. The doctor and his trollop were also loyal to their goose of gold.

The Thing was fiendish in cruelty. It satisfied its adolescent lusts on little birds and beasts. Puberty came — and the lust for womankind. Knowing its nature could never have human declaration, it enjoyed and killed to conceal forever all that woman might have spoken. And the Thing delighted in the dreadful impositions.

Hildreth led me brilliantly . . . Since the Thing was a home-confined being, it had needed boots to tread outside. It took boots, from Isaac Sallars' store. Often it had been outside its prison, killing. After the 1935 killings — of the hen, the puppy, and the cat — after Albert had left for school, it carried on with its "sport." It knew its routes and ways — how to leave the Lodge and how, swiftly, to vanish again into the wilderness behind the walls. The prowling mastiffs would allow it to come and go — defying others. And, supremely, none of the family nor the servants would say a word — since, by its every act, it involved them all, criminally, as accessories before and after felonious killing and murder.

"Yet" — and I swear Hildreth's voice was a clarion: a clear trumpet of triumph on that quiet shore — "it, and it alone, went free! Whatever the Law might do to the band of accessories and preservers, *it* was above and beyond all power of Law."

"Of course," I said, "a being not of sound mind — irresponsible — not to be held guilty or responsible for its crimes, by reason of its own abysmal unreason. The Law couldn't try and condemn a thing like that."

Barnabas Hildreth stood still. I shall always remember his amused, his ironical, his mesmeric gaze.

"My dear old Geoff! Use your loaf. Recall what Neuerbacher said about the Undead. It *is*. It is, in our living life, not-dead — yet, as a personage, dead to the Law. It does not come within the compass of legal procedures. It has no legal standing, no identity, no place. The Law cannot hang it — that would be murder. The Law cannot even try it — that would be the tantamount of knowingly putting the innocent into duress." He drew in a deep breath. "Tell me, Geoffrey, haven't you solved it *yet?*"

I shook my head.

He leaned forward, breathed just two words — and I came as near to

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fainting from excitement as ever I have been in my life.

My God . . . *of course!*

Then Hildreth went to London. He set machinery in motion — resulting in that august assembly I described in the opening of my account. Then when all was done and the powers left in wriggling intensity, hawking and squawking across a thousand years of legal reference and precedent, he went back to the Dower House of Great Travers.

What he did and said there, I shall never know. But on the night of the seventeenth of that month, Lieutenant-Colonel Travers blew out his brains . . . carefully having attended to those of one Dr. Pentony Hedley, first.

Then, *en masse*, the police descended. And all was at an end. Hildreth went with the police.

They found the Thing.

Mrs. Charles Travers, on the evening of February 10th, 1924, had given birth to a healthy and normal child. This was Albert — the heir. Taken to the Hedley Nursing Home, she was then in a second period of travail — and *two* more children were born.

They were attached — identical-twins — "*Siamese twins*," as common parlance has it — those two words Hildreth whispered to me. A thick adhesion co-joined their bodies, knitting — as by a bridge of flesh some four inches long — one right hip to another left hip. Hence, as they were seen by the County socialites, lying together in their cot — seen by the villagers in their side-by-side perambulator — they could be observed as a pair of normally existing beings.

As such — in ordinary circumstance — they might have been from the beginning. Had it not been that one was a manifest of evil and that the shock was overwhelming, doubtless Travers would have had the babies brought up in some clinic, openly, and freely. A nine days' wonder, no more. But the sliming Hedley reduced the hysterical man by druggings to a state of mental and physical impotence. Hedley saw a lifelong serenity of amazing blackmail — and he had it.

When the animal killings began, then there was time to think. The trick of "Hector" and Vienna was played. The Nazi inrush and the concentration camp system played beautifully into Hedley's fateful hand. The incubus of "Hector" was ended: ceased, exquisitely, to exist.

Thrice were these twins seen after babyhood. The boy after apples had seen them, Ella Wagstaffe saw them in her hour of death, and Franz Neuerbacher had seen them.

"I worked up — precisely — from the tale of the orchard raider." Hildreth sighed. "It was so simple. Neuerbacher, years later, almost repeated the lad's tale. When Hedley made that one immense mistake, then matters simply flew together: they did not need application or adherence. The evil twin was the killer — the 'Albert' looking one, the one with the 'angel face,' was the innocent.

"They were, of course, *schizoid* in

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every way. In bondage they exist as Devil and Saint — Fiend and Angel — even in masculine and feminine habit of mind. Neuerbacher's reference to the kiss in the play of Flecker's *Hassan*, helped. In such psychological 'monster-abnormality,' schizophrenic-conditioning, blood and the kiss . . . would attend." His eyes grew wise. "Ah, well. Wonder what'll happen?"

"I've got it now, I think." I ticked on my fingers. "Since the Law cannot and will not hold any other tenet that better a hundred guilty men go free than one innocent man should suffer, there is no case . . ."

"Too elementary for words, old man!" Hildreth was lazily patronizing. "The static fact is this: the life of the guilty man is that, also, of the innocent. The guilty cannot be made to suffer the death penalty, since the rope that kills him murders an innocent man. In lesser degree, the one twin was not the accomplice of the other. There is a dying deposition to state that one twin tried, valiantly, to stop the killer-twin, in the Ella Wagstaffe murder. In the earlier case of the W.A.A.F. murder, a team of experts agreed almost unanimously that the signs of the struggle all tended to prove one man had done his best to prevent the other from crime.

"No . . . the twins cannot even be arrested! One is manifestly non-guilty, and one cannot incarcerate an innocent man. A special Act of Parliament might be rushed through — but what does it matter? If the pair were, as I said in London, condemned to death . . . *because* one flesh was innocent, the doors of the court must open and give the guilty one his freedom . . . *because* the hangman cannot drop the guilty one without killing the innocent one. All is ended: *impasse* complete."

For four days. Then the innocent twin managed to secure a razor. He smiled at the guilty one — and cut his own throat.

They say the living one, raging and foaming in terror, lived for some seven minutes, looking on the one who, by being of his body, was destroying it. There they lay, dead and dying . . . and anathema shrieked in the night as, weaker and ever weaker, the Undead struggled with its own great doom. . . .

Away in the winds of the Kilshaven churchyard the sexton, fearfully, got out his spits and spade.

And a widower, called Wagstaffe, traveled many miles and spent much of his hard-earned money to buy red riband, just the hue of blood, and bloodily spotted tiger-lilies, co-joined, each, upon a single stem. This done, he picked up a pen and laboriously wrote the epitaph to The Great Travers Case — "Mine, saith the Lord."

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One of the many daymares of an editor's daily existence is the eternal search, the belaboring of mind and memory, for the perfect title. When a story is ready to be published and the title just doesn't quite click . . . Well, our old friend Stu Palmer knows our weakness for titular exactitude. So he usually heads his manuscripts about Hildegarde Withers not with one title but with a profusion of them. For example, the story you are about to read carried the following titles:

Where Angels Fear to Tread
Bird in the Hand
Murder Wears a Wig
Up the Wrong Tree
Repent at Leisure
The Riddle of Honeymoon House
Miss Withers Smells a Rat
End of the Line
Crime in Her Hair
Murder, She Says

With such embarrassment of riches, we simply settled for the author's first choice . . . Have you bought your copy of the second volume of Hildegarde Withers short stories? It appeared on newsstands November 15, 1950, and is called THE MONKEY MURDER. *Eight hilarious tales of that "meddlesome old battleaxe," with a biography of the author and a 'tec tintype of Hildegarde herself. Hurry, hurry, hurry — the first book of Hildegarde Withers short stories, published in 1947, has long been out of print and is now virtually a collector's item . . .*

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

by STUART PALMER

THE HONEYMOON cottage, Miss Hildegarde Withers sensed immediately, was as deserted and melancholy as a last-year's birds' nest. "Dear me!" sighed the maiden schoolteacher uncertainly. A realtor's *For Sale* sign was not at all the warm welcome she had a right to expect from her favorite niece. What she had meant to be a surprise visit had reverse-English on it, and her departing taxi had left her and her suitcase stranded in the desolate reaches of a half-built suburb in the drizzling rain.

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By peering through the blinds she could see hanging above the cheerless fireplace the framed Picasso print of the *Woman in White* which had been her wedding present to the young couple only last June. The letter-box was stuffed with mail, but it was not the front of a house that told its story. Marching around to the rear, past the empty gaping garage, she lifted the cover of the garbage can to discover coffee grounds, cigarette butts, empty pint bottles, and the remains of a small table-model radio which appeared to have been sat on by an elephant.

Miss Withers was about to tackle the lock of the back door with a hairpin when she heard a loud "Hey!" and turned guiltily to see a slatternly young woman in slacks climbing over the picket fence from next door. "Say, didn't they tell you at the real estate office to ask at Rauthmeyer's for the key?"

"Why — it quite slipped my mind if they did," the schoolteacher temporized. The door clicked open, and she was ushered into a little kitchen stocked with modern gadgets, but in extreme disorder. The house itself smelled dank and sour. "But isn't someone still living here? Are you quite sure the house is for sale?"

Mrs. Rauthmeyer nodded. "Furnished, too. The folks who lived here broke up a week ago. She's left, but he's still camping here off and on." Miss Withers obediently followed her guide on a conducted tour. There was dust lying thick on the bureau in the little back bedroom which Joanie had written would always be kept ready for Aunt Hilde, and the other chamber was a tangle of rumpled bedding and soiled masculine laundry. The closet was jammed with feminine garments. "Guess she just walked out in what she had on her back," the young woman suggested. "Probably she'll send for them when she gets settled."

"You have no idea where she can be reached?" Miss Withers asked, as casually as she could.

"Nope. We really didn't get to know the Sansoms very well, though they did come over to play bridge one Sunday. He works nights, you know. But even that bridge game broke up in a row when he took her out of a business double and they went down six."

"But surely a nice young couple wouldn't break up over a game of cards?"

"Easy to see you've never been married," Mrs. Rauthmeyer said wisely. "When a wife and husband fight, it's never really about what they seem to be fighting about. If you must know, I think that the main trouble was that radio program Joan was always listening to. Her husband hated it like poison — those war vets have jumpy nerves anyway, you know. Anyway, one night he up and smashed the radio to smithereens."

Miss Withers nodded. "Sinatra?"

"Huh? Oh, no, it was Dr. Somebody's Clinic on Family Relations, over one of those Mexican stations.

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Comes on at seven right when I'm getting supper, so I never listen." The door key jangled. "Well, if you've seen everything. . . ?"

Standing in the midst of the bedraggled living room which had once been decorated and furnished with such loving care and such high hopes, Miss Withers took a last look around. She shook her head at the stained carpet, at the shelves where *David Copperfield* and *Swann's Way* had been elbowed aside by a dozen thick volumes on the psychology of marriage, and last of all her eyes turned to the wedding picture silver-framed on the table. There were Joanie and Neil coming out of the chapel, looking incredibly young and ecstatic.

"Yes," the schoolteacher said softly, "I've seen quite enough." But typically, as they were leaving, she had to rush back inside and retrieve her umbrella. "I guess I'd lose my head if it wasn't fastened on," she observed tritely, as she returned. But young Mrs. Rauthmeyer's smile was mechanical, and as Miss Withers went on down the street she felt eyes on the back of her neck. "Thinks I'm a nosey-Parker," she told herself. But she had to go all around the block and come back from the other side across the vacant lot, before she could retrieve her suitcase and scramble in with it through the window she had managed to leave unlocked during her search for the umbrella.

Twilight was falling, but she dared not turn on any lights. With the aid of a pocket-flash the schoolteacher set out to search the honeymoon cottage as it should be searched.

Half an hour later she knew the worst. Her suspicions had been amply confirmed. But this was far different from her impersonal kibitzing on police homicide investigations in the past. This involved her own Joanie, whom she still thought of as a little girl. Why, somewhere in a trunk Miss Withers still had a sheaf of old letters, the first one printed in smeary red crayola, and thanking Aunt Hilde for the "lovely dolly that wears dipers."

She was so busy wool-gathering that she did not even hear anyone outside until the doors burst open and they were upon her.

Three thousand miles to the eastward a grizzled little leprechaun of a man, wearing only a towel and a big black cigar, picked up the telephone. "Inspector Oscar Piper? San Diego, California, is calling." A moment later he heard an all-too-familiar female voice saying, "Oscar? Is that you? Do you know what's happened?"

"What's happened is that I just had to get out of a hot tub and I'm dripping all over the floor! Hildegarde, if you want to play guessing-games —"

"Wait, please don't hang up. I'm only allowed one phone call. Oscar, I got out here this afternoon to find that Joanie Sansom, my married niece, has disappeared without her clothes —"

"The girl ought to be easy to locate, if she's walking around in her skin."

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"Stop trying to be funny! I mean without most of her wardrobe, and without even leaving a forwarding address. Oscar, there are signs that somebody tried to clean up bloodstains from the living room rug with *hot* water, and only a man would do that — women know enough to use cold. And there's no pistol in the house!"

"So what? Maybe there isn't a 75mm howitzer, either."

"But there is an *empty* holster for an Army automatic tucked away in a trunk under her husband's old uniforms, and a spare clip of .45-caliber cartridges. I just feel it in my bones that something's happened to Joanie. Nobody in the family really approved of her marrying that man because she'd only known him a few weeks and she admits she picked him up in the park . . ."

"Well," said the Inspector dryly, "I seem to remember that you picked me up in the Aquarium some years ago. Relax, Hildegarde. The girl's probably in Reno."

"Without her best dresses? If she was getting a divorce she'd certainly want to look her best at a time like that. Besides, the neighbors overheard them having a terrible fight one night about a week ago, and Joanie hasn't been seen since."

"It's out of my territory. Why don't you call in the local police?"

"*Call* them?" Miss Withers snorted. "Oscar, I guess I forgot to tell you that I'm in the San Diego police station, charged with illegal entry and grand larceny and I-don't-know-what-else." Her voice sharpened. "Are you laughing at me?"

"Just choked on my cigar," Piper hastily assured her.

"Oh. Well, anyway, while I was searching the house the snoopy woman next door noticed my flashlight through the window and called the police. I had my own suitcase with me, of course, and they took that as proof that I'd just finished looting the place. So here I am — they say my bail will be two thousand dollars."

The Inspector choked again. "Okay, Hildegarde. Put whoever's in charge on the line and I'll see if I can talk you out. But let this be a lesson to you . . ."

The toll-call ran through eleven dollars and ninety cents with tax while a suspicious Latin-American detective-lieutenant listened, and even when he had hung up there was little warmth in the brown shoe-button eyes. "Guess we'll have to turn you loose," he said reluctantly. "That New York inspector says you're just a meddlesome old battleaxe of an amateur detective, but that you've no criminal record."

She tossed her head, rather like a startled horse. "Well, I must say!"

"And besides," Detective-lieutenant Villalobos went on, "while you were phoning we opened the suitcase. The stuff inside must be yours all right — there's nothing that a young bride like Mrs. Sansom would wear even to a dog-fight."

"Never mind that. Now that

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you've satisfied yourself as to my *bona fides*, what are you going to do about my niece?"

"We're reporting her to Missing Persons."

"Not good enough. Don't you see, you must arrest her husband at once! She wrote me that he is junior chemist for an oil company here in town."

Villalobos gestured with both hands. "We can't arrest anybody on your suspicions."

"Not even if I'm willing to sign a complaint?" Her fountain pen appeared.

"Okay," said the detective, when the deed was done. "It's you that's climbing out on a limb, not me." Picking up her suitcase, he escorted her firmly outside and hailed a taxi. "Now, ma'am, you just run along and let us do our job."

"But you'll really send out a broadcast on Neil Sansom, and stake out a couple of your men in the cottage to grab him if he comes home?"

"Sure, sure. Goodbye, Miss Withers."

"But Sansom works —" she started to say, and then bit her lip. The taxi was moving away, and after all the man might be right. In a way she was out on a limb. Moreover a tiny red light was flashing off and on in the back of her mind, a warning that she had forgotten something she should have remembered. But what?

"Take me to the — the Signal Hill Oil Company plant," she told the driver, on a wild impulse. As they crawled through the downtown traffic, he switched on the radio and filled the taxi with hillbilly music. The schoolteacher suddenly remembered something, and looked at her watch, which showed a little past seven. "Can you get Mexico?"

"Sure can, lady. The Tia Juana stations, anyway." After some fishing around through bits of a sister-act singing *La Paloma* in Spanish and a re-running of the day's races at Hollywood Park in Brooklynese, Miss Withers at last heard a throbbing, feminine voice saying, " . . . work, work, work from morning to night cleaning and cooking and washing and then when he comes home, he just eats and goes to sleep, or else goes out bowling — he says. I'm just fed up, I am. Sometimes I get to crying and can't stop." There was a short pause, and then a man's voice: "That's her side of it, Doctor. But what about me? I work hard at the office all day and when I get home she hasn't even got her hair brushed, and around the house she's always nagging because we haven't got a new station wagon like our neighbors . . . ."

"But it's in English?" Miss Withers wondered. "I thought —"

The driver turned to grin lopsidedly. "Sure — they only broadcast from across the border to keep out of the jurisdiction of the Federal Communications Commission. Some of 'em sell snake-oil. But this Dr. Doan is pretty good — my old lady swears by him."

". . . and it is obvious here," a deep, oddly heart-warming baritone

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was saying, "that the marriage of our good friends Mr. and Mrs. Blank is gravely endangered by a growing anxiety-neurosis and sense of emotional frustration on the part of both husband and wife. It is not easy to sublimate the emotions of courtship into the workaday relationship of everyday married life. . . ." The hypnotic voice went on and on, and as she jounced around in the back seat Miss Withers' prominent nose began to wrinkle.

"Only thus," the mellow tones continued, "can you both make the necessary adjustments and find domestic security and peace. Here is a copy of my new book, *Pitfalls of Love and Marriage*, with my compliments." There was a brief musical phrase, and then: "And to you of our radio audience — are you one of those who are puzzled and confused by the problems and conflicts of modern living? Do you need counsel? Then sit down and write me a letter — just Dr. Doan, Radio station XBYO, Box 131, San Diego. My help is free, as a public service. However, if you want an immediate answer on the air or in writing, just enclose a five-dollar bill to insure a number-one priority. And now for the mail-bag as time will permit . . ."

There was a great deal more of the same, blasting forth the intimate secrets of a dozen or so unhappy human beings, with every problem glibly analyzed and solved in a few smooth sentences stuck full of the catchwords of psychiatry like a cookie full of raisins. When they arrived at her destination and the schoolteacher got out, it was with a deep sense of relief, for not even the cracking plant of an oil refinery smelled as bad as that radio program.

She approached a low white building surrounded by vast looming spheres and cylinders of shining metal, interlaced with a spider-webbing of pipes, and here and there erupting belches of flame into the sky. Miss Withers wasn't at all sure of what she was going to say to Neil Sansom when she found him. You couldn't just up and ask a young man if he'd murdered your niece — or could you?

As it developed, she needn't have worried. For Sansom wasn't at work today, nor had he shown up yesterday either. She received this news from a pudgy young man in soiled linen who said that his name was Hank and that he worked out of the same test-tubes with Neil Sansom. "When I heard that there was a lady out here looking for him, I thought maybe it was his wife," he confessed. "The poor guy's been almost off his rocker for the past few days. We were afraid he might do something desperate."

"So was I," the schoolteacher admitted. "Or that he already has. But you *must* have some idea of where I could locate him?"

"Well," suggested Hank helpfully, "there are only 194 bars in the San Diego area. You could start with those." More dispirited than ever, Miss Withers thanked him and returned to her waiting taxi.

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"Back to town, lady?"

There seemed nothing else to do. "The trouble with me," she told herself, "is that I'm acting like a mother-hen instead of a bloodhound. If I only had half my wits about me I'd — but of course! *The wedding-picture!*"

"Beg pardon, lady?"

She realized that she had spoken the last words aloud. "Turn around," said Miss Withers firmly. "I've decided to go down to Tia Juana."

"But that's a long haul, and I been driving this hack all day!"

"I'm already too far out on a limb," she told him, "to turn back now. Take me across the border." She leaned back in the seat, nodding almost happily. This is what she should have thought of in the first place.

The man muttered something to himself, but made an abrupt U-turn. A moment later he switched the radio on again, bringing back the mellifluous tones of Dr. Doan: "And in conclusion I say to the young woman who signs herself Miss Puzzled that since her fiancé has shown fixed infantile behavior patterns and evidently is in the grip of a mother-fixation with schizoid tendencies, she should forget him and —"

"And *frammis* the *stanportis*," Miss Withers put in tartly. "Driver, do you mind turning off that double-talk?" They rode on in silence, in the wrong direction.

A few miles northward along the coast from San Diego sleeps the village of La Jolla, famous for Torrey pines, abalone shells, and for having the most mispronounced name in recent history. In one of the most secluded of its neo-Moorish beach homes, shielded from the street and the curious gaze of the tourist by a line of pepper-trees, Dr. Charles Augustus Doan sat in his comfortably-furnished study and listened to the sweet sound of his own voice.

Dr. Doan stroked his neat little Van Dyke complacently, making a mental note as the XBYO station identification came on in staccato Spanish that the program just ending was his 2,940th. Then he loosened the cord that held the heavy wine-colored dressing gown around his ponderous body, and turned again to his hobby. Other men of standing might collect first editions or Flemish paintings, but the doctor fancied five-dollar bills. With the dexterity of long practice he removed these from the heap of letters which represented yesterday's mail. Through wide French doors he could look out as he worked upon the rain-washed, moonlit garden filled with cacti and rare succulents, to the garage at one side which held his two late-model sedans, and a little farther to the low vine-covered retaining wall and the shimmering Pacific beyond. Somewhere nearby a mocking-bird was singing.

Not bad. Not bad at all for a man who only twelve years ago had been trying to eke out a hand-to-mouth existence as Professor Charles, mentalist and lecturer on sex (Miracle of

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the Unborn, 12 count 'em 12 genuine human embryos in bottles, carnival bookings available for next season, address care *Billboard*).

Though he had a competent staff, this was one operation which Dr. Doan always liked to perform in person. Into his pocket went the money, and into a wire tray beside him went the letters, to be dramatized on the air, answered briefly at the end of the program, or directly by mail. Letters without any enclosure went into the waste-basket unread, but luckily these were few and far between.

After a while there came a discreet tap at the door, and without removing the big corona from his mobile mouth, Doan said, "Come in, Patty."

The secretary was a pale, wispy woman on the rocky side of thirty-five, addicted to shapeless knitted dresses and open-toed shoes. As was her almost unvarying custom, Patty Givens gave a dry little nervous cough before she spoke. "Excuse me, Doctor —"

"All set? Everybody here?" Doan started to rise. "Might as well get it over."

"Er — no, Doctor. Dora and the writers are in the living room, but Julio hasn't had time to get back from the studio. It's something else. A young man insists on seeing you. He's sort of wild-looking — perhaps I ought to call the police?"

"Police? Of course not," Doan cut in hastily. "Would I be doing my duty if I turned away a poor soul who is in need of counsel? Just explain to him that I don't keep office hours for consultation, but that I'll try to see him later —"

"You'll blamed well see me right now!" came a high, excited voice from the hall, and a young man entered the room as if blown by a high wind. His clothes were hung on his thin body scarecrow style, and there was dried blood above his eye.

The doctor looked at him in cold, offended dignity. "My dear sir, you can't come bursting in —" he began, and then noticed that the uninvited guest was brandishing a large and nasty-looking automatic pistol. "Please sit down and put that thing away," he said quickly and firmly. Then his voice softened. "Something tells me that you are in serious trouble. You don't have to make threats to receive any help that it is in my power to give. Tell me about it, lad. Just what is your problem?"

"*You* are!" blurted Neil Sansom.

From the doorway Patty cleared her throat. "Doctor, hadn't I better call —?"

"Of course not," Doan told her sharply. "But you might get our visitor a stimulant."

"Save your liquor, I don't want it. I came here about my wife!"

"Ah, yes." The doctor sighed. Even at his age, which was pushing sixty, there were a good many phone numbers in his little black book. Some no doubt had husbands. This was likely to be awkward, unless the fellow identified himself. "Perhaps, Miss

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Givens, you had better step outside and leave us in privacy," he suggested.

Once the study door was closed, even with her ear pressed close against a panel, Patty could only hear the rumble of their voices. She sighed, and then went back to the kitchen and — first making sure that the Mexican cook had left for the day — helped herself to a glass of cooking sherry, chasing it with a peppermint. "For my nerves," she told herself. Not that she lacked confidence in Dr. Doan's ability to handle any conceivable situation . . .

When the buzzer sounded, summoning her, she raced back into the study and stopped short. There was the doctor standing alone beside his desk, smiling as he ground out a cigar butt in the tray. "That awful young man —" she cried. "I didn't see —"

Dr. Doan nodded toward the garden door. "I gave him what help I could, but he is still in a nervously-disturbed state and I thought it just as well that nobody meet him in the hall."

"Doctor, you're wonderful!" Patty gazed on him with dog-like devotion. Then she saw that Doan was holding the pistol.

"Yes," he continued, "I suggested that our young friend take a good stiff walk along the shore and cool off. And I convinced him that in his condition it would be wiser to leave the weapon with me." Doan dropped it into his desk drawer. "By the way, aren't we ready yet?"

"Oh, yes, Doctor! They're all in the living room waiting. I don't think they suspect a *thing*." Patty stepped quickly aside to hold the door, and Dr. Doan started down the hall. To a fresh corona he held a gold cigarette lighter bearing a caduceus made of tiny emeralds, and on the obverse *To Dr. Charles with gratitude from Lana*, which had been his birthday present to himself a year ago.

In the vast, underlighted living room, filled with arches and niches and wrought-iron, were gathered the four people to whom Dr. Doan liked to refer as his fellow-workers. Dora Dinwiddie, Lady of the Hundred Voices, was a veteran of vaudeville who never let anyone forget that in the early days of radio she had been featured on Ed Wynn's show. Dora played all the feminine parts for this program, from teen-age daughter to doddering crone, though in person she was a handsome forty, hung with bracelets and bangles.

Nearby, sprawled on the big divan were the Carnehan brothers, graduates of the Hollywood quickie studios, a pair of paunchy, graying adolescents in sweat-shirts and slacks. Ray and Sam, known respectively as the Drinking One and the Chasing One, wrote and arranged the program, read some masculine parts, and ghosted Dr. Doan's books.

At the moment they were sharing their *Racing Form* with Julio Barnes, a thin, waspish man with the manner and the flying hair of a concert maestro. He handled music and sound effects, cut the recordings, and each

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evening drove down across the international boundary and supervised the actual broadcasting of the program from the little studio at XBYO.

It was a tribute to Dr. Doan that they all rose — even Dora — when he entered the room. Patty Givens assumed the role of hostess, and bustled around refilling their glasses and gleefully recounting how the doctor had overpowered and disarmed the wild-eyed intruder by sheer mental force. But Doan cut her short.

"My friends and fellow-workers in the cause of human welfare," he began in his honeyed baritone, "tonight I have a very important announcement to make, as you perhaps have guessed. Contracts were signed today between myself and a relative of a very big *politico* across the border, which will make us equal partners in *El Negro y Blanco*, the Black and White network, Mexico's first television chain. Originating here in Tia Juana but sent by wire to be rebroadcast from Mexicali, Nuevo Laredo, and Matamoros will be the new video program — Judge Doan's Court of Human Problems!"

There was a little stir among the listeners, the beginning of surprised congratulations, but Dr. Doan raised his hand. "As you know, we have waxed enough platters to carry the old show until the first of the year, when it will go off the air. You have all worked with me hard and faithfully, and therefore I have a sort of bonus, an advance Christmas present, for each." Doan produced a sheaf of envelopes from his pocket, much as he might have taken a rabbit from a silk hat, and handed them to the hovering Patty to distribute.

Dora Dinwiddie opened hers first. "A check for two months' pay!" she cried delightedly, and then read on, in a voice that suddenly went harsh: "In final settlement of all claims and obligations." Her bracelets fluttered and jingled. "But —"

"Oh, yes," said Dr. Doan. "You see, television is quite different from ordinary radio. For instance you, Dora, have a hundred voices. But you have only one face. The new show will require a completely new cast of characters for each broadcast, except for myself of course. Also a completely different sort of preparation and script, and a technical staff trained in the video field. It is with deep and heartfelt regret that I say goodbye to you, and I wish you success as you go on to other fields of service." The doctor's smile warmly embraced them all, and then he bowed and swept out of the room.

The four of them stood there, flat-footed. It was Julio Barnes who first found his voice. "That — that *cabron!*" he whispered, and spat on the rug.

Ray Carnehan for once in his life put down a highball half-finished. "Why, I owe my bookie more than the amount of this check! We'll get a lawyer and sue —"

Sam interrupted. "You know what we'll get in the Mex courts. Besides, our contracts are with the program

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that's being killed. Line forms here for unemployment insurance." He was thinking of the golden, laughing girls of the Hollywood Sunset Strip and how far twenty dollars a week would go with them.

"We've made Doan a million dollars and now he kisses us off with two months' pay that he'd owe us anyway!" Dora Dinwiddie cried, for once in her own true voice with the Iowa twang to it. "Slaving away for ten years on less than Guild scale for that flea-bitten chiropractor. . . ."

"*Judge* Doan now," Julio Barnes put in. "It's a wonder he didn't go the whole way, and ordain himself Father Doan!" He snorted. "The Confessional on the Air!"

Patty Givens cleared her throat from the doorway. "You shouldn't say such things about a brilliant man who's devoted his life —" But the four of them stamped out of the house, making rude remarks about what Dr. Doan could do with his life, and the front door slammed behind them. Patty peered out of the front window, in an odd state of fluttery happiness, as they held a further indignation meeting on the sidewalk under the pepper-trees, and then she let go a sigh of relief as they separated and drifted away. In her opinion they were crude, vulgar people and unworthy to have shared in the doctor's great work. She was happy to see the last of them.

She almost said as much to Dr. Doan as a little later he lay stretched out on the big red-leather couch in the study and — cribbing occasionally from his library on popular psychology — dictated answers to the day's mail. It was in moments like this that Patty Givens was cosiest, just the two of them alone in the big rambling house. She felt even more intensely than usual the glow of the sherry inside her, the tingling sweetness of the peppermint in her mouth, and the warmth of the tiny electric heater on her ankles.

It would have been altogether perfect if the doctor would only let her close the doors into the garden and draw the shades. Sometimes the looming shapes of the giant cacti made her nervous. In the moonlight one Joshua-tree in particular resembled a lurking man, with an arm upraised in warning. . . .

Patty was still busy with the doctor in the study when the doorbell rang. A pause, then it rang again, and finally someone hammered as with a night-stick. "Just a *minute!*" the secretary muttered, and then hurried down the hall and flung open the front door. "You're here, thank heavens —" she started to say, and then her jaw dropped. For instead of the blue uniforms she was expecting, there was only a tall bony woman with a long face which vaguely resembled Man o'War, topped by a hat straight out of *Godey's Lady's Book*.

The apparition held an umbrella poised, ready to knock again. "I wish to see the doctor at once," announced Miss Hildegarde Withers.

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Patty coughed. "Oh — but well, you see the doctor doesn't practice. I'm his secretary — you could write him a letter if you wish his counsel. . . ."

"I don't," said the schoolteacher. "But I've been tracking Dr. Doan all over Tia Juana and back, and I'm not leaving until I see him. I —" Suddenly she stopped, her eyes curious and almost sympathetic. "What are you afraid of? I won't bite."

"Oh — why, I expected it to be the police at the door," Patty admitted.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, really. But you see, I thought I saw somebody in the garden. I've imagined it lots of times before when I've had to stay and take dictation late at night, but tonight there really *was* something there. And the doctor finally said I could call the police if it would make me feel easier. I just know it was that same awful young man who was here earlier, waving a gun. . . ."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Miss Withers. "A young man with a gun . . . but I suppose that a man like the doctor has many enemies. . . ?"

Her remark was abruptly punctuated by the sound of a shot, incredibly loud and clear, from somewhere back in the house. "Oh, God!" shrieked Patty Givens. She whirled and ran.

Though left at the starting gate, Miss Withers made up ground on the straightaway and they were neck and neck at the study door. Flinging it open, she was met by the acrid stench of cordite. There had evidently been a fierce though brief struggle, for the desk drawer was gaping, papers and letters were scattered like autumn leaves, and the electric heater had been kicked over.

The big, bearded man in dressing gown and slippers lay crumpled on the floor between desk and couch, eyes staring at nothing. In a second Miss Withers satisfied herself that Dr. Doan was forever finished with human problems, including his own. Yet there was no wound, no bullet-hole that she could see.

Patty Givens, who had snatched up a vase and rushed out into the garden like a tigress defending her cub, now came slowly back. "I heard the murderer — running away," she said, half-choking.

Miss Withers came to the door and listened, but there was by this time nothing to hear except the swishing of the surf on the beach, and the distant singing of the mocking-bird. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that the secretary was doing a nervous little dance-step, an absurd hop which increased until her whole body was shaking. "Oh-oh-oh," moaned Patty, "I'm going to —"

"You are not either," said the schoolteacher, and slapped her. Then the woman subsided into great shuddering sobs, clinging to her like a scared child. It was at that opportune moment that the police finally arrived. Just her luck, Miss Withers thought, that when for once in her life she had been on the scene of a murder ahead of the authorities, she had to be

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entangled with a hysterical woman.

The officers took one look at the body and then one of them raced for the phone, the other shepherding the two women into the living room where he stood guard over them. Nor did he seem disposed to pay heed when Miss Withers tried to give him a few well-intentioned hints about the handling of the case. "Lady," he told her, "I only work the prowl-car beat."

Outside, autos arrived hastily, and there was the banging of doors, heavy steps in the hall, and the tantalizing sound of masculine voices that she could almost hear. The schoolteacher grew very tired of sitting on the sidelines, of listening to Patty Givens coughing and sniffing, and of the scent of peppermints. "This has gone far enough," she finally burst forth. "I demand to see the person in charge. After all, I've been working on this case longer than anyone else, even if I did guess wrong about the victim. . . ."

"Shut up — please," said the patrolman. "Your turn'll come."

When it came, Miss Withers was rather sorry she had insisted, for it was none other than her old acquaintance Lieutenant Villalobos who finally came into the room, wearing an old trench-coat and a worried scowl. The shoe-button eyes flashed in recognition. "Oh, *no!*" he said, wincing. "Not twice in one day."

"Lieutenant, I didn't expect to see you in charge way out here. . . ."

"La Jolla happens to be part of the city of San Diego," he told her. "I was never sorrier." Wearily he took out a black notebook. "Now ma'am, how do you explain . . ."

"I came here, after bribing the people at Tia Juana to give me Dr. Doan's home address, because I happen to know that my niece Joanie Sansom *always* listens to Doan's radio program. I thought that maybe she isn't dead after all, because if he'd killed her, Neil wouldn't keep their wedding picture around to look at. I hoped to persuade Dr. Doan to include in his next broadcast an appeal to her to come home or let us know where she is. . . ."

"And it was just a coincidence that you happened to be on the spot when he got killed. Is that your story?"

"But I wasn't! I was standing in the doorway, trying to get his secretary to let me see him, when the shot was fired. And for that matter I don't know if the man was murdered or not. I didn't see any wound anywhere."

Villalobos smiled grimly. "You should have lifted his toupee, then."

It was Patty Givens who gasped. "His *what?* But the doctor didn't —"

"Oh, sure. They make 'em nowdays so nobody can tell. Anyway, Doan was shot in the center of his bald spot at close range, the bullet angling down into his body. We figure the hair-piece must have got knocked off in the struggle, but the murderer took time out to replace it, neatly covering the wound. The gun itself —"

"An Army .45 automatic . . ." whispered Miss Withers.

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"I was about to say that the gun is missing, though we found an ejected .45 shell under the bookcase." The dark eyes narrowed. "You seem to know a lot about this."

"Put it down as a lucky guess," the schoolteacher said, somewhat feebly.

But she was saved for the moment by Patty Givens, who could keep silence no longer. She blurted out the breathless story of what had happened that evening, of the awful young man forcing his way in with the gun and how Doan had taken it away from him, of the session here in the living room when the doctor fired his staff, and of how later she had seen someone or something moving in the garden.

Villalobos listened patiently, making notes only of the names and addresses of the four members of the staff who had been paid off. He tore out the sheet and handed it to a uniformed man. "Pick them up," he said.

"But Lieutenant," objected Miss Withers, "don't you think it unlikely that people would commit murder just over losing a job?"

He gritted his teeth. "I've seen murder committed over eighty-five cents. Killers aren't reasonable."

But it was really Patty who answered the question. "You don't know them," she insisted. "They'd all been with the doctor so long they thought they owned their jobs. Dora Dinwiddie has a young husband and she knows he'll walk out on her if she stops making big money. Julio Barnes was in prison once for trying to strangle a man in an argument over the proper way to adjust a microphone. And the Carnehans — they both live up to every dime they make, and Ray can't do without liquor any more than Sam can do without little blonde extra girls."

"Surely there are lots of other jobs," the schoolteacher objected.

Patty shook her head stubbornly. "Nobody goes back to one of the big networks again after ten years with a shoestring station down here. This is the end of the line."

"Okay!" growled the lieutenant. "I'm asking the questions. What you're saying is that one of the four people who got their final pay checks tonight thought it over and then sneaked back through the garden to get even with Doan. Is that it?" He tugged thoughtfully at his lower lip. "Now who besides yourself knew that the gun was lying there handy?"

"Why —" the secretary flushed. "Maybe I *did* mention about how magnificently the doctor quieted and disarmed that young man, when we were all in here."

"So the Dinwiddie woman, both Carnehans, and Barnes knew the gun was somewhere in the study?"

Patty nodded, and started to speak, but Miss Withers interrupted. "There was somebody else who knew — the person from whom the gun was taken."

Villalobos' bow was exaggerated. "Could be. Also could be that that person's name is Neil Sansom. Anx-

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ious to swear out another warrant?"

"Certainly not! Because whoever did murder Dr. Doan, I'm positive that it wasn't my unfortunate nephew-in-law. If he had been going to commit homicide he'd have done it on the spur of the moment when he first arrived. I'm also positive —"

"If there's anything you're *not* positive about, let me know!" the lieutenant told her. He turned Patty Givens over to a subordinate with orders to have her sign a written statement. "That'll be all for tonight," he told Miss Withers, taking her by the elbow and steering her down the hall.

"But, Lieutenant, I want to make a written statement too! And shouldn't we have another look around Dr. Doan's study? I was thinking of the papers on the floor, and the ashtrays, and his checkbook. . . ."

"I said that would be all!" Villalobos repeated, in a queer, strained voice. But as they reached the front door, it was flung open and in came two bulky detectives, with Neil Sansom handcuffed between them. He looked sulky, scared, and guilty as Cain — but still in the pale, handsome face Miss Withers could see the boy of the wedding picture.

"Found him walking along the beach," was the report. "Says it was a nice night and he was just taking the air. But guess what we found in his pocket, Loot? A nice big .45 automatic that he happened to find a few minutes ago right below this house, left high and dry by the tide."

Neil only muttered, "Why shouldn't I have picked it up? It's mine."

"You poor boy," cried Miss Withers quickly, "don't say one thing more until I get you a lawyer. I'm Joanie's aunt from New York, and I'm afraid I've helped get you in a lot of trouble. Just tell me one thing — where is she?"

Neil Sansom seemed to be too tired to be surprised, even at this. "I haven't seen Joan since she knocked me cold with an ashtray and walked out of the house. I don't know where she is and I don't care any more."

Then his captors jerked him along, and Miss Withers found herself being escorted out the front door in what was almost the equivalent of the bum's rush. "That fellow in New York warned me over the phone that you'd get in my hair," Lieutenant Villalobos muttered through clenched teeth. "Goodbye, *please*."

However, the schoolteacher had to give him credit for one thing. The man was courteous enough to have a police car take her back to San Diego. It was not until they passed the ferry terminal and pulled up outside the familiar big brick building with the barred windows that she realized the lieutenant's hospitality included putting her up for the night.

After a sleepless night in a detention cell and a breakfast of mush and jail coffee Miss Hildegarde Withers did not think that anything could make her more miserable than she was already. But she had not counted

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on being hauled out to the house in La Jolla again shortly before noon, and coming face to face with her missing niece in the front hall.

The girl clung to her tearfully. "I was in Las Vegas," Joanie cried. "But I hired a plane as soon as I heard it on the radio."

"But, child, why didn't you let anybody know?"

"I was afraid if I wrote anybody or sent for my stuff, Neil would find out where I was and come after me. I wanted to give him a real good scare, but I really wasn't going through with a divorce. Only you see, when we quarreled he tried to spank me!"

"The beast!"

"No, he isn't! It was all my fault, every bit of it. And now they're going to hang him for murdering that awful doctor —"

"No, they're not, child." Miss Withers tried to keep her voice confident.

"But yes they are!" Lieutenant Villalobos came briskly toward them, a look of smug satisfaction on his newly-shaven countenance. "Just a few things to straighten out on the time-table, which is why I've got everybody rounded up here. Will you follow me into the living room, please? You too, Mrs. Sansom — you're the motive." Then he dropped back to take Miss Withers' arm. "Sorry we had to hold you last night, but you know how it is. By the way, I'll have to admit that was a good steer you gave me about Doan's checkbook."

"Was it?" She blinked. "And the ashtrays?"

"Nothing in them but cigar butts."

"Oh," said the schoolteacher, her mind racing like a fly-wheel. But there was no time. The lieutenant ushered them into the living room, already rather crowded with uniformed men and material witnesses. Dora Dinwiddie sat on the edge of a hard chair, playing with her bracelets. The Carnehan brothers, both stiff and sober now, shared the piano stool, and Julio Barnes and Patty Givens slumped in easy chairs. On the divan, manacled to a stony-faced policeman, was the guest of honor. Neil looked up at Joanie as they came in, let out a breath, and then turned back to stare at his shoe-tips again.

"I'll make this short and sweet," began the lieutenant. "It's important that we have the times established. At eight thirty last evening Miss Patty Givens came into the doctor's study and told him that there was a young man insisting on seeing him. She has identified the prisoner as being that man, and he doesn't deny it. At that time Miss Dinwiddie and both Carnehans were waiting in this room, and Mr. Barnes was on his way here, right?"

They all nodded. "Okay. At eight fifty-five Dr. Doan rang for Patty Givens and showed her a gun he'd taken away from Sansom. . . ."

The brisk, confident voice went on and on. Miss Withers racked her brains, but no inspiration came. She felt that she was drifting in a boat

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without oars or rudder, caught in a swiftening current and with the roar of a cataract ahead.

"Okay. At approximately nine o'clock Dr. Doan came into this room and made a little speech, after which he distributed pay checks to four of his employees. Around nine fifteen they left —" He referred to his notebook again.

"And I for one went straight home," said Dora Dinwiddie. "My husband will back me up!"

Sam Carnehan spoke up. "If it's alibis you want, I spent the rest of the evening with Mimi, the day cashier at the Casa. She's not supposed to date guests, so I imagine she'll deny it."

His brother Ray confessed to having spent the previous night in a round of bar-hopping, starting at the Beach and Tennis Club and ending up on Skid Row in downtown San Diego. Julio Barnes said he'd gone home, played his violin for a while, and then taken his spaniel out for a long walk. All alibis, of a sort, but nothing Miss Withers could get her teeth into. It had to be one of them.

Villalobos continued summing-up. "So after you four had left, Patty Givens and the deceased started cleaning up the dictation in the study. At this time Sansom was taking a walk along the beach and trying to cool off. Finally he wandered back from the beach and came up into the garden and Patty Givens saw him out there, and called the police. That was at ten fifty-eight. At a minute or so after eleven Miss Withers arrived and rang the doorbell, so Patty had to leave Doan alone in the study to answer the front door —"

"I wouldn't have," Patty cried. "Only I thought it was the police answering my call!"

The lieutenant nodded. "I'm not suggesting that her arrival at that moment was a put-up job, but it did give Sansom the chance he was waiting for. Seeing that the doctor was alone, he slipped in from the garden and grabbed the gun out of the desk, or maybe he even asked Doan to return it to him. Anyway, once it was in his hand —"

"But what about the checkbook?" Miss Withers cut in desperately.

"Oh, yes." Villalobos nodded. "There were four stubs in it dated today, filled out properly for the four final pay checks. And there was a fifth check torn out, stub and all — *that* was the check he wrote to Neil Sansom, trying to buy his life!"

Across the room Neil started to rise, but felt the jerk of the handcuffs and sank back again. "Probably," continued Lieutenant Villalobos, "the shot was fired while Doan was bent over to write the check, thus accounting for the location of the wound. Sansom destroyed the check when he got outside, but then he lost his nerve. He remembered that Patty Givens could identify him — so he wandered up and down the beach, probably trying to get up courage enough to use the gun on himself."

Joanie leaned down and whispered in Miss Withers' ear. "He's innocent,

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I know he is! Neil wouldn't do anything like that in a million years. He couldn't!"

But the schoolteacher only sat there, still held in her nightmare. The detective-lieutenant's reconstruction was the only possible one. There was nothing, nothing at all she could offer in its place. It was that, or else she had to take her pick of the four — Dora, the Carnehans or Barnes — and they all had the sort of alibis innocent people usually have.

Through Miss Withers' mind flashed the events of last evening, like film being hastily rewound on the reel. Neil's arrest, the lieutenant's questions, the wait with Patty in the living room, the scene in the room with the body, the sound of the shot —

"I'm afraid, Lieutenant," she said a few moments later, "that my niece is going to faint. Perhaps I might get her a glass of water?" Without waiting for an answer she whisked out of the room, plunging past the uniformed man in the doorway so swiftly and erratically that she almost threw him off balance. In less than five minutes, however, she was back with the glass of water. But now there was a look in her eye which — had this been one of Oscar Piper's cases — would have made that wise little Irishman order full speed astern.

Lieutenant Villalobos, however, still had the bit in his teeth. "Now listen," he was saying to Neil, "you can save yourself and everybody a lot of grief by making a full confession. You killed Dr. Doan because you knew he had advised your wife to leave you, and no doubt a jury will take that into consideration. But it's an open-and-shut case —"

"Please don't shut it just yet," interrupted Miss Withers airily. "By the way, Lieutenant, I just noticed in the bathroom that you're having the plumbing opened up. An excellent idea. I was sure that the missing check and stub had been burned or disposed of right here in this house."

Someone in the room sighed, very softly. "What the —?" began Villalobos.

"And remember, I tried last night to tell you that I thought it odd the killer replaced Doan's toupee neatly over the wound. That would seem to imply a squeamish person, who had to stay in the room with the body for a while and couldn't stand the sight of blood. Did I mention to you too about how Patty Givens here went rushing out into the garden after the murderer, she said? Up to then she'd been timid as a mouse. And how did she know that Doan was murdered then? She barely looked at him and there was no visible wound."

"Oh-oh-oh!" screamed Patty furiously. "You horrible woman, to say such things! Why, I worshipped the ground he walked on!"

"No doubt you did," Miss Withers conceded. "Until he told you that you were fired too. What could be more natural than after getting rid of the rest of his staff he'd get rid of his secretary? They say there's

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nothing more aggravating than an office-wife, especially one that coughs and sniffs and eats peppermints constantly. . . .

"And that jiggling little dance-step that Patty was doing in the study last night," the schoolteacher continued. "I thought at the time that she was only shaking with hysteria, but *it was really the open-toed shoes!*"

"That's enough of this nonsense," Villalobos cut in. "You're trying to pin this thing on the doctor's secretary, but you're way off base. Haven't you forgotten that in your own statement you said you were talking to Patty Givens when Doan was shot?"

"Yes, Lieutenant — *but Doan was already dead when I rang the doorbell!* Patty Givens had killed him and thrown the pistol into the ocean — but not far enough — before she phoned the police. She thought I was the law, so she made a quick last-minute adjustment in the study and hurried to answer the door, thinking that she was about to give herself a perfect alibi. Because nobody can tell within five or ten minutes the exact time a body expires."

Miss Withers stopped for breath. Something had gone terribly wrong, for it should have happened —

Then a bullet ricocheted screaming down the hallway, and the sound of a shot boomed through the house.

For an instant everyone in the living room was paralyzed, and then the cool Bostonian accents continued. "What you just heard was a pistol cartridge that I snatched from the belt of that officer in the doorway and stuck into the filament of the electric heater," she announced. "When the heater got red hot, the thing went off. Of course I should have faced the heater toward the open door, so the bullet would go harmlessly out to sea, as it did for Patty last night." Miss Withers peered toward the secretary. "But it had to appear that there was only one shot fired, didn't it? You wanted to get rid of the *second* empty shell, but of course you didn't think it would be that hot. You worked it into the open toe of your shoe, and that's why you were dancing. . . ." Patty Givens suddenly stood up.

"There's no need to say any more," she told them dully. "Since you're tearing up the plumbing you'll find the scraps of the check anyway." Once started, she kept on talking endlessly, on and on. But long before she finally ran down, Miss Withers and the Sansoms were far away. It was a fine bright day, with little clouds like tufts of cotton-wool.

"But you're coming home with us for your visit, after all?" Joanie was begging, Neil's arm around her and her head on his shoulder.

Miss Withers thought not. "You young idiots deserve a chance to get together and pick up the broken pieces without anyone else butting in," she told them. "Perhaps I'll come later on. Right now, I think I'll make a long distance call to a certain hard-headed little inspector in New York and give him a piece of my mind. 'Meddlesome old battleaxe' indeed!"

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In August 1947, F. Tennyson Jesse, creator of Solange Fontaine and author of those two criminological classics, "In Death They Were Divided" and "Treasure Trove," wrote to us as follows: "EQMM continues to come and delight us. We need cheering up in this sad little island . . . I have just dug up a short story which I feel and hope is just your cup of tea. It came out in 'The Strand' a few years before the war and as far as I can remember hasn't been published at all in America. . . ."

It has taken us all this time to publish F. Tennyson Jesse's short story — yes, frankly, we have been hoarding it. And indeed, the story is just our cup of tea. But 'tec tea is a matter of taste. Do you like yours with sugary sleuthing? With creamy crimes? You'll find no sugar or cream in Miss Jesse's tea. She prefers her tea flavored with lethal or larcenous lemon — and so do we. 'Tec tea with a bite, with an astringency that puckers not only the lips but the mind. . . .

LORD OF THE MOMENT

by F. TENNYSON JESSE

JAMES PENTREATH pulled the collar of his Burberry closer round his aching throat in the hope of protecting it from the gusty wind, but only succeeded in sending little trickles of cold rain that had clustered along the collar's edge down upon his shirt.

A horrible evening, and why Kit had insisted on going for a long walk when by all the signs — and James was very weatherwise — a rainstorm would be bound to overtake them, was an unintelligible thing. Yet Kit had to be humored; he was, after all, a man suffering from a sort of nervous breakdown. James thought of a nervous breakdown rather contemptuously. Overwork indeed . . . he didn't believe that Kit or anyone else overworked while waiting for briefs and deviling for a K.C. If anyone felt inclined to suffer from a nervous breakdown it would surely have been himself rather than Kit. James worked very hard in his famous gardens, breeding strange new flowers and improving old ones. And by the death of Hubert, Kit had merely lost a brother-in-law, not at its best a very intimate relationship.

Kit was staying with Evie now, probably not so much comforting her for the loss of her husband — or so thought James, rather vindictively — as being comforted himself for the fact that his sister was in sorrow. That was like Evie, to be sorrowful and yet be the comforter. But, of course, the thin, sharp edge of Evie's sorrow had

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had time to grow blunt in the past six months of readjustment. James could not place his finger on any one point of time and say, "Here Evie began to forget Hubert and think of me . . ." and yet he felt sure that that transition had begun to take place. It made the next six months of waiting, before he felt he could bring Evie to marriage with him, seem infinitely long. And how did Kit really see him, James, the ardent, misunderstood human being who loved and wanted Evie?

James stole a look at Kit from beneath the dripping brim of his tweed hat. People always said there was some uncanny sympathy between twins, but although Kit was very like Evie to look at, James did not believe that he knew in the least what was going on in her mind.

Kit thought Evie was mourning the death of her husband; well, so in a way she was, but none knew better than James, that intimate friend of both Hubert and Evie Rice, that there had really been very little in common between them. Evie was a creature of the simple out-of-doors. Hubert had always been anxious about himself and his health, always writing pedantic letters to *The Times Literary Supplement* on the nice question of when to use a semicolon; or translating Greek and Latin poems with admirable accuracy, but a really amazing lack of the original fire.

Of course, Hubert had loved Evie — who could help it? — and yet even his love and admiration had held something of the pedantic. "She has a head for a helmet," he said once, and it annoyed James that he had never been able to think of a more utterly satisfying description. For Evie, like her brother Christopher, had a head for a helmet. He thought of the phrase now, looking at Kit's young straight profile, the brow cut almost in one with the nose, the slight lift of the indented nostril, the incredibly short curve of the upper lip, and the swift, sure sweep of the fine jawbone up to the ear. How often James had looked, with that quick catch of the heart which was pure admiration, at the flat, triangular modeling below Evie's cheekbone, even as he was looking at that same arrangement of flesh and bone in Kit's face now. Seen like that in pure profile they both of them had, in Hubert's phrase, heads for a helmet — Grecian heads, completely unmodern, and so with a hint of the beauty of eternity about them.

People did not think Evie pretty. Her type wasn't modern enough. She had no extravagantly long lashes, no softening curls. Her eyes were small, calm, of the same glossy but indefinite hazel-brown as her hair, and added to the effect she gave of being in bas-relief by being shallow-set. But Hubert had been just the man, James had to admit, to appreciate the pure precision of statement made by her face. Seeing Kit as definite and clear as Evie, James could almost forgive him for this ridiculous walk.

Kit plunged on without looking at James and without speaking. The

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gusty rain swirled about them. On this high moorland the yellow blossom of the gorse had only just begun to show here and there on the low-growing bushes, but down in the valley they had left, where James's house and his famous gardens sprawled over the southern slope, there were wallflowers, narcissi, and daffodils flaunting themselves by the acre, and in the deep hedgerows the faint blur of the wild violets showed here and there amongst the clustering primroses.

James thought regretfully of his house as he struggled on across the moorland. It was not a pretty house — few modern Cornish houses are. It was of gray granite, with uncompromising sash windows and a slate roof, but at least it stood foursquare to the wind and weather. There would be a good fire waiting and a hot bath. James felt he needed a hot bath very badly, and a hot drink: his throat had begun to be sore that morning — the more fool he, he thought, to let Kit, who had dropped into lunch with him, persuade him to go for this walk. Kit wanted to see his brother-in-law's grave; but goodness knows he must have seen it before, for he had been staying with Evie for a week. Why couldn't he have waited until another day? Why drag the unfortunate James, who after all was only a friend of the family, out to the bleak, gaunt church, with its gray, square tower with the one little pinnacle at its corner like an ear pricked perpetually for the sound of some message?

James had never liked St. Veryan Church or its churchyard, or the ugly, scattered moorland village which it dominated, and yet he stood obediently by Kit's side because it was almost as though he were standing by Evie's side, and glanced from that young, straight profile, at once austere and tender, to the long, low mound which covered Hubert, where the young grass was showing a triumph of thin, pure, flamelike green.

"Poor devil!" Kit had said as they turned to leave. "What did you really think of him, James?"

James started. "Think of him? I was very fond of Hubert. He was my greatest friend here, you know. It's not a very populous district, and he was about the only human being with whom one could hold an intelligent conversation."

"Do you think he and Evie were well matched?"

James paused; he felt he had to be guarded in his reply.

"For the present, perhaps," he said, slowly. "I don't think it would have lasted. He was too old for her, for one thing."

"He was a year younger than you," said Kit, with unaccustomed brutality.

James felt quite startled. "In years — in actual years, I suppose he was, but *that* isn't the only age, is it? Hubert was born old, born a scholar — and a pedantic scholar. Evie by nature was happier in my gardens than in his library."

He stopped abruptly, wondering whether he hadn't said too much, but

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Kit seemed to notice nothing amiss. They had left the churchyard, and it was then that, looking from the height on which they stood to the far, dark rim of the sea, James had drawn attention to the purplish clouds, like clusters of strange and evil fruit, that had gathered in the sky and were drooping their swollen masses towards the water.

"There's a storm coming up," he said; "we had better get back."

"Not yet," urged Kit. "It will do you good, James, to sweat your cold out of you. Let's go round by the moor."

The storm broke over them even as he spoke, and James was all for sheltering in the church — his throat was really very painful — but Kit negatived this suggestion.

"That won't do at all," he said. "If you want to make the chill worse, go and stay for an hour in a dark, cold church. Come on, let's make for The Wink, and we can have a drink there and see if we can't get some sort of contraption to take you home. If you ask me, I think you had much better keep moving."

The hotel was over a mile away from St. Veryan by road, and half a mile if you went across the moor. Its real name was Cotton's Temperance Hotel, but it was locally known as The Wink, for it had never been worth Mr. Cotton's while to go to the expense of a license, since it was merely necessary to wink for him to produce whatever alcoholic beverage his guests required.

The two men struck across the moor, therefore, without going to the little inn in the village, where they could only have got beer and no fire to drink it by, confident that at The Wink they would be made comfortable. Even in that half-mile they both became very wet. The rain blew almost level across the uplands, charging on them in great clouds, but James struggled on, for there was nothing else to be done now, although when he felt even the inside of his shirt getting wet he became more and more resentful. It was all very well for Kit, a young man in the twenties — a wetting more or less didn't hurt him; but James suffered from colds that were humiliating in their onslaught. He would be in bed now for days, snuffling and blowing, and unable to see Evie, though she would be sure to call and ask for him, but you couldn't let a woman, especially a woman like Evie, see you with a red nose and rheumy eyes. Oh, God, how his throat hurt! He seemed to be swallowing over an iron bar, and there was Kit, with his fine, unconscious profile, plunging along quite happily beside him. If it hadn't been for that likeness to Evie, James could have hated him.

Here was The Wink at last, long, low, whitewashed, with incredibly small windows, which, however, reflected the pleasant leaping glow from within.

James stamped into the narrow hallway and shouted for Mr. Cotton. The landlord appeared at the door of the

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Big Room, which was known simply by that appellation. School treats, mothers' outings, and dinners of cheerfully inebriated artists, when visiting genius joined up with the local talent and everyone contributed to the feast, took place at its long middle table. This early in the year, the Big Room was merely devoted to the casual passer-by, and to Mr. Cotton's own family. The long table down the center was not laid for meals, only the three or four little tables that stood in the ugly square bay window.

"Why, Mr. Pentreath!" exclaimed Cotton. "Come in, come in. And Mr. Elliott, too. Some wet you both are. 'Tes a dreadful day, surelye."

James nodded pleasantly. He liked being on good terms with everyone in the countryside. He liked this instant recognition of him by old Cotton.

"We're soaked through, Cotton," he said.

"Ah," said the landlord, bowing his head respectfully, and his voice tinged with a proper degree of sympathy, "you mustn't be getting ill, Mr. Pentreath, nor Mr. Elliott. Mrs. Rice has surely had enough trouble, poor lady, what with poor Mr. Rice having been taken away from us in the midst of all the pleasures of this life, as you might say — not that he was much of a one for the pleasures, always being a quiet gentleman. But come in, both of 'ee, and I'll be getting 'ee something hot."

He took their raincoats from them, again tut-tutted sympathetically over the state of James's shirt collar, and ushered them into the Big Room.

Kit hesitated a moment on the threshold, but James went on towards the fireplace with all the assurance of a man well known, liked, and respected in the countryside, a man whose position was secure, who had even evolved a new scarlet daffodil of untold value, which he had called after himself.

There were several people round the fire, but they made way for James's assurance, and he bade them good evening heartily, if huskily.

The first person James saw was Mrs. Cotton, in shape like a cottage loaf that has been upholstered by some whimsical child in black cloth. She came forward and greeted him with a touch of hesitation in her manner. It was as though, James said to himself, she had suddenly "come all over" shy.

He spoke to her heartily to put her at her ease, and then he began to distinguish the other people seated round the fire. Two of them were men whom he knew slightly; pleasant, quiet fellows on a walking tour, who had been down to see his scarlet daffodil and had shown great interest in his famous gardens. They were nondescript-looking men enough, one small, rosy, and very innocent-looking, the other tall, but stockily built, with bovine, unintelligent eyes, although James had to admit he really had been interested in the scarlet daffodil.

Beyond them sat an elderly lady

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busily knitting. Mrs. Cotton performed a sketchy introduction — "Miss Stocker, from London. She'm walking. What they call a hiker in the newspapers."

"Miss Stocker and I know each other," said Kit; "we lunched at the same table coming down on the train."

Miss Stocker nodded in greeting. She was a pleasant-looking, weather-beaten woman, so true to type that she barely seemed to have any identity at all. She was the out-of-doors, well-bred, ultra-virginal English spinster to the life.

James and Kit joined the circle round the fire and the steam began to arise from their wet boots and leggings. Mr. Cotton hovered, amiably anxious.

"What about punch, Mr. Pentreath? I do make a good punch sure enough. Everyone would like a drop of punch, I'm thinking."

The bovine man — Mr. Anderson, James remembered that his name was, probably a Scot, for his friend was a Mr. Saunders, and James vaguely classed everybody with North Country names as Scottish — glanced approvingly at Mr. Cotton.

"That will be fine," he said, "and the first round is my treat."

James protested, but Mr. Anderson would have his way. "I have had the most interesting time of my life seeing your conservatories and gardens, Mr. Pentreath, and it would be a pity if I couldn't stand you a round of punch."

"Well, the next one is on me," said James, jovially, and he leaned back in his chair with the not unpleasant feeling of being one of the great men of the neighborhood condescending amiably to chance strangers.

The punch was made and met with warm approval, even from Miss Stocker, who sipped it with a determined air, as though maintaining in the face of all that being a woman was no reason why she shouldn't enjoy a drink.

The hot fluid, spicy and good-tasting, trickled pleasantly down James's sore throat, and presently it seemed to him that it even eliminated the iron bar over which he had been swallowing the whole afternoon. He tugged at his soft collar, trying to open it towards the blaze of the fire. His glands were hot and aching to the touch, and he passed his hand uneasily about his neck.

Kit leaned forward towards the fire, his lean young hands clasped loosely between his knees. Unlike James he had drunk hardly any of the punch. He sat staring into the fire as though, in the old-fashioned phrase, he saw pictures there.

"By the way, Cotton," he said, suddenly, "my sister tells me that her parlormaid's father fell down in a fit and was picked up dead on market day last week. Farmer Dorothy he was, wasn't he?"

"That's right," said Mr. Cotton. "He was a good man, was Dorothy, but always with a tendency to get a rush of blood to his head. Sometimes

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here his face would turn so red it seemed to me it would burst. The doctor had warned him it might happen — apoplexy it were. The missus and I went to the funeral two days ago. Well, says the missus to me, well, Bob, that do only show that in the midst of life we are in death, as it says in the Good Book."

"That's true," said Mrs. Cotton.

"It's funny," said Kit, still staring into the fire, "that he left his farm that morning, and said goodbye to his wife and drove into market without knowing he was never going to see them all again. I suppose really no one ever does know when they have seen a thing for the last time, until it is too late. That's because we don't know when we are going to die."

"It needn't even be that," said Cotton, with a jovial chuckle. "As you do know, Mr. Pentreath, I was working out in the mines in South Africa for thirty years. The time came for me to go home, and I took a cabin, paid for it and all, and then gave a last bachelor party in Cape Town. I thought I would see the sun rise next morning, and Table Mountain and everything I knew so well, but I didn't. I was just carried on board like a dead log by my good friends, who thought it was better that I should go aboard like that than miss my cabin that I had paid for, and when I came round we were standing right out to sea, and I never saw the red earth nor the white arum lilies blowing against it again, or Table Mountain either. The last time I ever looked at those things I didn't know it was the last time, I thought I would see them all again. But then I came home and met the missus and settled down, and now I know I will never see South Africa again, but I didn't know the last time I looked at it."

Miss Stocker gave a little cough. "I had a cousin," she said, "a dear cousin, of whom I was very fond — a great scholar. He came up to town to see about something at the British Museum, and he came to my little flat — I have a dear little flat in Elm Park Gardens — and we made arrangements for me to spend my summer holiday with him and his wife. We neither of us had any idea then we were seeing each other for the last time, but we were, for he died quite soon after, poor fellow."

James, the grateful glow of the punch informing his whole frame with a sense of well-being, pondered over these remarks. Yes, it was true what they were saying. Nobody knew when he was seeing a thing for the last time. Even a soldier in the War couldn't have known. He would always have hoped he would have come out of each engagement alive. He, James, had never thought when he took a last look at England after a leave that he wouldn't see it again, and he had been perfectly right.

"Now there's your scarlet daffodil, Mr. Pentreath," said Anderson. "When it's done flowering this year you won't know whether you will see it flower next year or not."

James thought that it was rather

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bad taste to bring the matter so near home, but he was still more startled when Kit remarked:

"Well, look at my brother-in-law, Hubert Rice. I don't say he was ever strong or well — he wasn't, or he thought he wasn't, which comes to the same thing — but he had had one or two attacks of the same sort before, and when he had his last fatal one he had no reason to think he had been on his last picnic. It was after a picnic, wasn't it, James, that he was taken ill?"

"Eh?" said James. "I don't know. I don't remember. Yes, perhaps it was."

"Well, there you are," said Kit, "if you'd told poor old Hubert that he would never sit out on a Cornish moor in the late summertime again, with the gorse all hot and sweet, he would have been staggered. He'd no idea he'd never go outside the house any more."

"But if it comes to that," said little Mr. Saunders, suddenly, in his shy, innocent way, as though he were an overgrown child suddenly giving vent to his thoughts amidst a party of grown-ups, "I don't suppose any human being knows when he sees his own face in the glass for the last time."

The company pondered over this for a moment.

"That's true," said Miss Stocker, slowly. "Look at all the people who die in their sleep. I suppose they all of them, the women anyway, look in the glass the last thing at night."

"My brother-in-law," said Kit — and James wished that Kit would not persist in the bad taste of dragging family affairs into a public conversation — "my brother-in-law insisted on being shaved the last day of his life, and looked in the glass and said he felt a little better. He never looked in it again, because he was unconscious next day and dead by the evening."

"Well, Mr. Cotton," said James, "what about this second round of punch?" To himself he thought, "And I hope Kit doesn't get too much of it," and looking down was surprised to see Kit's glass still practically untouched on the floor beside him.

Mr. Cotton got up and busied himself making the second bowl of punch. More and more James began to feel that grateful warmth stealing over him, the iron bar at the back of his throat receded farther and farther. It seemed to James that he was set aloof in some safe and warm place — some Olympian height whence he surveyed humanity as he sipped nectar.

"Some people must know," he informed the company, suddenly, "when they are seeing a thing for the last time. Take the spies who were caught in the War, for instance, and shot in the Tower of London. They knew."

"Oh, yes," agreed Kit, "they knew that they had seen the sun set for the last time and all that sort of thing, as any condemned man knows it, but what they didn't know was when they were taking their last 'bus ride in freedom. They didn't know till afterwards that it *was* their last 'bus ride.

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For instance, you know Evie always goes to church here and Hubert used to go with her. Most people do in the country. Well, the last time Hubert went to church he didn't know that the next time he would be carried in feet first."

James was thinking his own thoughts, and so was not outraged as he had been before by this persistent reference to personal affairs on the part of Kit. Indeed, he hardly noticed it, away on what Evie had always called "one of his theories."

"What it means is that man is helpless because of his ignorance. He is like a small child in the grip of time, of the moment, of what is called 'now.' But your spy condemned to be shot, who takes his last look round the morning world, is lord of the moment. That must be a great thing, to be lord of the moment. Most men go all through their lives without ever knowing what that means. If one could know anything final and certain about any moment of living, one could count oneself 'a king of infinite space.'"

Kit countered swiftly with: "But you know the penalty of that. 'I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.' What about bad dreams, James?"

"There couldn't be any. Don't you see that a man can only be lord of the moment, can only know all it contains, when he is certain of immediate death?"

"Yes, I see that. So you don't think that there's anything in: 'For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil'?"

"No," said James, violently. "I do not."

There fell one of those sudden little silences which sometimes embarrass a company, and during which to break the tension some well-meaning person invariably looks at his — or more usually her — watch, and announces brightly that it is either twenty minutes to or twenty minutes past the hour. Miss Stocker did so now, saying with a nervous giggle that seemed oddly out of character in such a competent weather-beaten woman:

"An angel passing. . . . Twenty past six. It's a funny thing, but it never fails."

Fool of a woman, thought James. But as he looked round at the little company, warmed though he was with the punch and the firelight, a cold breath seemed to blow across his spirit. It was as though everyone there was in some odd way his enemy, as though the friendly, even obsequious faces, were looking at him with that cold curiosity belonging to visitors in a Zoo staring at some strange new animal. It was absurd, of course, and he gave himself a little shake back into actuality. He took yet another glass of the punch and felt safe and happy again.

"Well, Mr. Cotton," he said, "what about the jingle to take me home? Is it ready?"

"Coming round now, sir, I think,"

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said Cotton. "I thought I heard the old mare's hoofs a moment ago."

He got up and went to the window and peered through. "There 'tes, sir. Sure I can't let 'ee have a dry coat?"

"No, no," said James, "that will be quite all right. Kit, what about it? It's out of my way if I drop you first, and it's out of your way if you drop me first."

"Never mind," said Kit. "I'll come with you and then drive on home."

James said good night politely to the company and settled up for the second bowl of punch and the jingle with Mr. Cotton in the hall. Then he made a dash through the driving rain and burrowed into the jingle, whose canvas sides were flapping in the wind.

Kit followed him, the driver made a clucking noise, and the old mare broke into her steady jog trot, from which she never deviated except when going down-hill. Directly she heard the brake come screaming on she started to walk, and no power on earth would induce her to do otherwise.

They lumbered across the moor, and then began to creep down the long hill to the seaward valley where stood James's gardens. Neither he nor Kit had talked much. Now that he was out of doors, James still felt the glow of that warm and pleasant sanctuary made around him by the punch. The future looked very rosy and pleasant to him, and he suddenly wished passionately that Evie, as his wife, was waiting for him at home.

The brake came off at last, the mare was flicked with the whip and started to amble up the drive between the dark, rounded bosses of the rhododendrons and the fir trees that bordered it, to James's square, stone house. James got out and with his usual punctiliousness tipped the driver. When he had done so he found to his surprise that Kit had got out also.

"Are you coming in?" he asked. "Do by all means if you want to. Stay the night if you like, and send a note home to Evie."

But Kit shook his head. He had joined James in the porch, which was sheltered from the wind and the rain.

"James," said Kit, slowly. "There's something I want to say to you. It wasn't by accident I took you on that walk this afternoon."

"Eh?" James, with his hand on his key, reaching to fit it into the lock, paused and stared at Kit. A little light came through the bottle-glass panes at the top half of the door, and again he thought how like Evie's face Kit's was.

"I wanted to see you at Hubert's grave — to try and see how you felt."

"Why should I be feeling anything? What are you driving at?"

"Do you remember, James —" began Kit, "no, you wouldn't, but I do — how a year ago when Hubert was still alive we were having some silly conversation about names, and what they meant, and we looked all ours up in the dictionary, and we found that James meant 'a supplanter,' and I was just going to make some silly joke

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about your being more of a planter than a supplanter, when I caught you looking from Evie to Hubert?"

James stood very still, the key suspended in his hand.

"Well, and why shouldn't I?"

"No reason really, and I know it sounds rot told like that. But it's what put me on the track, all the same."

"On the track?"

"What made it seem not impossible to me — what most people round here have been hinting. Evie and Hubert didn't notice that look, but it told me something — I can't explain how — about what you felt towards Evie — and towards Hubert. I oughtn't to be saying what I am, I suppose; it's giving you a warning, and I've no business to be doing it. But I think Evie would like me to, because she was a friend of yours."

"She is a friend of mine," said James, and just stopped himself saying: "And she's going to be more."

"She is not a friend of yours any longer," said Kit, steadily. "At first she was indignant because people talked about the way you were always up at her house, or asking her down here. Then Miss Stocker —"

"That awful female? What about her?"

"Hubert was the cousin she mentioned tonight. The last time he was in London he told her that he thought you were in love with Evie, and would want to marry her if he died."

"That's not a crime."

"No, that's not. But Hubert mentioned, laughing, that if you hadn't been a friend of his he would have thought you were trying to do him in, as he was ill twice after a meal with you."

"He was ill, anyway, at the time."

"Perhaps. And then it was at a picnic with you that he was taken ill with his last illness."

"He caught a chill."

"Perhaps. I still hope so. But in case it wasn't that — I thought I'd tell you. I've not had a breakdown. Miss Stocker and I both came because Evie sent for us. Anderson and Saunders — they're not called that at all, and they're not on a holiday. D'you understand?"

But James did not understand, not really. That curious exaltation he had felt at the inn still held him. He couldn't be anything but safe — he, the clever James.

"I know you're talking or hinting a lot of rot, that's all."

"I hope to God it is all," said Kit, and he looked at James with a sudden gleam of relief on his face. James seemed so unconcerned.

James went in and started to wipe his feet. Kit stood in the porch, looking like some stern young archangel, his eyes fixed on James's face. James took off his tweed hat, and beat the rain from off it against the edge of the white-painted door.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Kit," he said; "good night." He went in and slammed the front door, and Kit heard the bolts being pushed home.

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Well, I've given him his chance, thought Kit, miserably; *I suppose I oughtn't to have done that much.* And he climbed into the waiting jingle and was driven off towards Evie's home.

James shouted for his parlormaid, and when she came gave his wet raincoat into her hands, ordered dinner to be put forward, and went upstairs to take his hot bath. He lay in a sort of trance. He wasn't very seriously perturbed by what Kit had said. That sort of tingling glow still held his veins and his brain in a pleasant numbness. He got out from the bath, mechanically dried himself, dressed in a tweed suit, and went downstairs. It was not until the familiar ritual of dinner smote upon him, with a sort of astonishment that anything so usual should continue at such a time, that the full realization of what Kit had said came home to him. James pushed his plate away and buried his face in his hands. The intoxication of the punch had left him utterly. Those two men, Anderson and Saunders — only Kit had said that those weren't their real names — he supposed they were from Scotland Yard. All that interest in the scarlet daffodil had been a pretense. How had they guessed about Hubert? It could only be guesswork so far. Nobody knew. The doctor had signed the certificate without a qualm. Hubert had always been complaining of aches and pains and his heart was bad. The certificate had attributed death to heart disease, nephritis, and gastritis — surely enough to satisfy anyone?

Naturally, James had tins and tins of weed-killer; what gardener in a big way hadn't? How could he have kept up his famous gardens without weed-killer? It was nonsense to say that James had given anything harmful to Hubert. People always gossiped a bit, of course, but no one could really suspect James of anything — not seriously. They'd think it just bad luck that Hubert had been ill once or twice after a picnic with James. A sudden thought smote him, and he remained very still at the dinner table, his long hands clasping the edge of the table and looking very dark against the white damask. Of course, what Kit had meant was that they were going to exhume Hubert. *They were going to find out!*

James got up and rang the bell. "I'll have coffee in the library," he said, "and see that it's hot."

He sat over the fire drinking his black coffee and his good old brandy, but he seemed beyond intoxication tonight; just as earlier a pleasant numbness had held his mind, so now a deadly clarity pervaded it. His mind ranged over the past year and came to rest at last on two days earlier when he had seen Evie. It occurred to him that he had been looking at her then for the last time, although he had been ignorant of the fact. He had caught a ghost-like glimpse of her in Kit today, but Evie herself he would never see again.

At about eleven o'clock he got up and went to the window and drew aside the curtains. The storm had died

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down and there was no more rain. A half-moon rode high beyond the fleeting cloudwrack. *I must go out*, thought James; *I must go out. I must see what they are doing. I may not have very long.*

He went into the lobby, where the smell of galoshes and mackintoshes, and Harris tweed and rubber Wellingtons, met his nostrils, and thought: *This sort of thing can't be happening to me in the midst of these familiar smells.* And then he thought for the first time that Hubert also might have said, had he but known what was killing him: "But this cannot happen to me — murder always happens to someone else."

James pulled on a pair of stout boots, put on a mackintosh and a cap, and let himself out of the house again. He took the long walk up to St. Veryan churchyard, which he had sworn to himself only that afternoon he would not take again for a long time to come. He was wearing crêpe soles, in spite of the danger of slipping in the wet, and his footsteps were soundless. He found his way with an electric torch, but as he went down the village he extinguished it.

All St. Veryan village was asleep, no light showed from any low-browed window. James went along quickly under the churchyard wall, and then stopped and listened. He heard a very faint clink, clink, as though a spade were striking against stones and earth. He made his way round to a place he knew of where the wall was low and was shielded by some big, black cypresses. He climbed over it, and standing between the trees, peered through the dark curtains that they made.

Parting them a little to look towards Hubert's grave, he was acutely conscious of the fragrance of the cypresses, still wet from the rain, and the chill feeling of their fine, close-set foliage to his bare fingers. A faint light glimmered from the place where he had been that afternoon, but it was only very faint, and James, straining his keen-sighted eyes, discovered why. A screen of sacking had been erected all round the grave, and within that screen someone was working. He heard the rhythmic dig and scoop of the spade, followed by the light, hardly perceptible sound of earth falling upon earth.

James crept a little nearer between the cypresses. Several men were there. He saw Saunders and Anderson and the local undertaker — there for identification, he supposed.

Then into the faint light of the lantern came a face well known to any newspaper reader in England — that of a celebrated pathologist. There was a faint murmur of voices and James heard him say: "Stop, that's enough."

Another hour found James wandering over the moorland. He had watched the dim procession going to a cottage which he knew belonged to Evie, and was untenanted. He saw sacking being drawn across the windows, a light spring into being behind it, and, suddenly sick, he had turned

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and tramped the moorland as he had tramped it that afternoon, but now with blind rage in his heart. Why had this thing happened to him? He would be such a much better husband to Evie than Hubert had been. Why had he let that unguarded glance play from Evie to Hubert, for Kit's keen young instincts to seize upon? He could imagine everything that had followed after — the talk in the countryside because he had not had the will power to stay away from Evie as he had meant to do, but had tried to see her nearly every day. What a fool he had been not to realize that country people always talked. And Miss Stocker, with her absurd old maid's devotion to her cousin. And from what Kit had said — Evie — some intuition aroused in her that all was not well. James had noticed himself that he had never seemed to find her at home the last three or four weeks. He had put it down partly to chance, partly to his idea that she was beginning to care for him, and didn't want to show it yet, but it had not been that at all. Evie had written to Kit and the Stocker woman. Kit must have gone to Scotland Yard, and those two men had been sent down — the two men who had flattered him and spent so much time lounging about the village talking to all and sundry, interested in his scarlet daffodil, picking up every bit of gossip they could.

Dawn was beginning to break as James came down the valley. He let himself into the house and went up to the bathroom, and opening the little white enamel cupboard, searched for his old-fashioned razor. As he did so a remembrance of the talk at The Wink on the night before flashed into his mind. . . . *last time.* . . .

The last time Hubert had shaved he hadn't known it was going to be the last. Well, Kit had got no change out of him, no difference even in the expression of his face when they had talked about Hubert in that blazing firelight with those two men and that woman watching him. He was cornered, and he knew it. He knew but too well what they would find in Hubert's body, but at least no one had tricked him into the faintest shade of fright. And he was not going to stand his trial — even with the chance of being found Not Guilty. Evie was lost to him — his old certainties were gone.

It was still not very light in the bathroom, and James drew the curtains as far apart as possible until the cold glimmer filled the room like a tide. He looked out of the window and saw objects beginning to assume the sharpness of daylight, as though they were re-gathering consciousness like a man awakening from sleep. He looked into the glass. There was no hot water, but he did not want hot water for what he had to do.

As he laid the blade of the razor against his throat it flashed across his mind that at last he was lord of the moment. For he knew that he was looking at his own face in the glass for the last time.

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THE ADVENTURES OF TIMOTHY TRANT

WHO KILLED THE MERMAID?

by Q. PATRICK

LIEUTENANT TIMOTHY TRANT of the New York Homicide Bureau awoke from a pleasantly unorthodox dream in which his sister had turned into a green and orange necktie. Outside the Pullman window a rugged Vermont had given place to a more domesticated Massachusetts. Young Lieutenant Trant, who found Nature predictable and therefore uninteresting, contemplated moving for lunch into the adjoining diner but decided he was lazier than he was hungry.

He picked up a learned quarterly, entitled *Thought Trends*, which his intellectual sister had forced upon him at Montpelier Junction. He soon discarded it in favor of a real-life murder magazine bought furtively behind her back. It featured, he knew, an article on one of his recent successes and he had consciously delayed the pleasure of reading his praises in print.

As he ruffled the pages, he became aware that he was under observation. He glanced across the aisle to see that a new passenger, who must have boarded the Flier while he was dozing, was seated in the place opposite him. He was an elderly, thin little man with a white bald head. His face was almost hidden behind a *Holyoke Guardian*, but one blue eye was exposed and was fixing Trant with a stare of extreme suspicion.

Always intrigued by the unexpected, Trant was fascinated that he should inspire such hostility in a stranger. Then, with a sigh of disappointment, he remembered the terrible green and orange necktie which had been his sister's birthday present and which he had felt obliged to wear throughout the long weekend with his family.

"It's only the tie," he thought sadly, and returned to his magazine.

He found the article which gave him flattering billing as "Ex-Princeton Athlete and New York's Boy Wonder Policeman," but the continued stare of the man across the aisle marred the pleasure of the flowery adulation. The orange and green necktie was Lieutenant Trant's Achilles' heel. To make matters worse, the photograph of himself which adorned the article looked even more lubberly and sinister than the Line-Up pictures of wanted criminals on the reverse side of the page.

He finished the article, however, and, tearing out the page with his photograph to keep for a certain precocious and bloodthirsty niece, glanced once again at the little man across the aisle.

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He was still reading or pretending to read the *Holyoke Guardian*, but the blue eye continued to observe Trant around the edge of the page with basilisk severity.

Almost for the first time in his life, Lieutenant Trant became unnerved. He rose with a pretense of dignity, took down his weekend bag, and withdrew to the wash room. There he changed the offending orange and green for a discreet black knitted tie and returned to the car.

The Pullman, which was the last on the train, was almost empty. Apart from himself and his sartorial critic, there were only three passengers. Extremely tie conscious now, Lieutenant Trant studied them as he moved to his place. Immediately behind his own seat, a jovial business type, who was playing solitaire on a knee-balanced suitcase, sported an unspeakable butterfly bow of electric blue pockmarked with yellow dots. Beyond, an intense, scholarly young man, holding a small book close to shell-rimmed glasses, wore a shrill and shabby scarlet four-in-hand.

The necktie of the third passenger, if it existed, was hidden behind a large black beard which would have done credit to a Byzantine bishop. The owner of the beard was sound asleep and a solid head bobbed portentously up and down above a black-coated bosom.

"In such company," thought Trant defensively, "why should I be discriminated against?"

When he reached his own place, his neighbor had dropped the newspaper and had closed the accusing eyes as if to sleep. But for the first time his own necktie was exposed to view.

To Lieutenant Trant's delighted surprise, he observed that it was by far the most monstrous of all — a shocking chartreuse on which a pink hand-painted mermaid brandished a cocktail glass. Surely a man with such a taste in neckwear could never have objected to the relatively innocent orange and green. Perhaps there was some other reason for the regard of savage enmity.

"Perhaps he doesn't like my face," mused Lieutenant Trant happily. "Or perhaps I remind him of a ne'er-do-well nephew."

These entertaining fantasies made him hungry and he soon strolled into the diner. In a short time he was joined by the intense scarlet four-in-hand who ate in quick snaps, his bespectacled nose still buried in his book. Not long after, the jovial blue bow appeared, distributed Babbittish smiles, and ordered beer with his lunch. Trant was toying with a Diplomat Pudding when the Byzantine beard chose a table opposite him. After ordering, he tucked his napkin under the beard and, to Trant's satisfaction, revealed a glimpse of a most objectionable lavender foulard.

"Scarlet," mused Trant, smug in the security of his own chaste black, "yellow-spotted blue, lavender, chartreuse with a pink mermaid. Every law of esthetics outraged."

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He paid his check and returned to the Pullman. As he resumed his seat, he noticed that his cross-aisle enemy, alone now in the car, seemed sound asleep with the *Holyoke Guardian* spread like a tablecloth over his face.

Then suddenly the train swerved around a bend and the dislodged *Holyoke Guardian* slid from the sleeper's face and flapped to the floor.

Astonished at what it revealed, Trant jumped up and sprang across the aisle.

His neighbor's bald head lolled grotesquely against the window pane. The mouth gaped; the blue eyes glared in an unseeing stare. The mermaid necktie, twisted to the left, had been pulled viciously tight into the loose folds of the man's neck.

"Well!" exclaimed Trant.

And, as he felt for the pulse, he realized two facts. The left blue eye which had surveyed him so sternly was obviously of glass and the owner of the glass eye was obviously dead.

"Murdered," reflected Trant with shocked but professional fascination, "by a scarlet four-in-hand, a butterfly bow tie, or a lavender foulard. . . ."

Cautiously he surveyed the scene. His own copy of *Thought Trends* lay on the seat half-obscured by the body; the sheets of the *Holyoke Guardian* clung around the legs. A pressed buzzer brought a Pullman porter whom Trant sent for the conductor. With a flourish of credentials, he quickly ordered him to wire ahead to the Springfield police and to send in from the diner his three fellow passengers. After final instructions to put two porters on guard at the car's exit, he searched the Pullman vigorously.

He did not find what he was looking for and, in not finding it, realized rather disappointedly that the case was solved almost before it had begun. . . .

As the train clattered toward Springfield, the scarlet four-in-hand, the blue bow, and the beard-hidden lavender foulard sat together in shocked uneasiness in the section nearest the wash room. Trant, blocking the aisle, looked down at them soberly. He held the copy of *Thought Trends*.

"This, gentlemen, is the last car. Since I was next door in the diner, I know no one passed me to come in here and only you three came out." His gray eyes moved from one face to the other and settled on the jovial blue bow. "Did you, sir, go into the wash room before you went to lunch?"

The blue bow gave a sickly version of the Babbitt smile. "As a matter of fact, I did — to wash up."

"As I thought," murmured Trant, as if to himself. "While the blue bow was in the wash room and the lavender foulard was asleep, the scarlet four-in-hand could have strangled the mermaid and arranged the newspaper over the face to simulate sleep. On the other hand, while the scarlet tie was in the diner and the foulard asleep, the blue bow could have done the same. Still on the other hand, while the scarlet and the blue were in

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the diner, the lavender foulard . . ."

"But it's ridiculous," exclaimed the bearded foulard in a voice that was unexpectedly high and piping. "I don't even know this dead person."

Trant smiled ruefully. "Neither do I. But in this case the victim's identity is insignificant."

The scarlet four-in-hand jumped up. "This is pretentious bluff!"

"Pretentious, maybe, but not bluff." Trant waved the copy of *Thought Trends*. "This magazine is mine. When I went to the diner, it was on my seat. When I returned it was on the deceased's. Clearly, after I'd left, he ran out of reading material and borrowed mine. But this wasn't the only magazine I had. I regret to say I also bought a real-life murder magazine. It is no longer in the car.

"Yes," he continued, "the murderer was daring. If the newspaper hadn't slipped from the face, he might have skipped the train at Springfield before the crime was discovered. But he made a mistake in disposing of the murder magazine instead of returning both magazines to my seat where they might not have been noticed. In fact, the whole murder was the mistake of an exaggeratedly frightened man. He had nothing to fear but a glass eye."

He shrugged. "You see, the glass eye had a peculiar life of its own. Earlier, when the murdered man was reading the paper, I had the distinct impression that he was watching me with extreme suspicion. Just a trick of the glass eye, of course. But supposing I'd had a guilty conscience, supposing I saw him watching me reading a real-life murder magazine and happened to know that *in it* . . ."

Suddenly the butterfly bow sprang up, knocked savagely past Trant, and plunged toward the exit.

Two porters, appearing precipitously, jumped on him and held him.

"What. . . !" gasped the scarlet four-in-hand and the bearded foulard.

"Yes," mused Trant, "a very unnecessary murder. He thought the glass eye had unearthed his secret, but, in fact, the significant page wasn't even in the magazine. By an odd coincidence, I had torn it out — my photograph was on the back."

He produced from his pocket the folded sheet and studied the Line-Up of Wanted Criminals on the reverse side. Among them, wearing a clipped mustache but immediately recognizable, was a photograph of the jovial blue bow. Trant read:

WANTED FOR MURDER

Joseph Donegan, convicted of embezzlement, wanted for murder of guard while escaping Cook County Jail, Colorado. . . .

The case had been exasperatingly simple. Yet there were, perhaps, compensations. *New York's Boy Wonder Policeman Solves Case With Lightning Rapidity*. A rather smug smile played around Lieutenant Trant's lips.

Yes, that would be pleasant. And, in a way, the laws of esthetics had been justified too. Next to the mermaid, the yellow-spotted blue bow had been the most repulsive necktie in the car.

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Here's the way Will himself tells it: about four years ago Will and Mrs. Will and another couple were enjoying the blue haze of a Balinese-type night club on East 59th Street, Bagdad-on-the-Hudson. It was a Saturday night, and they were doing a few of the clubs prior to a midnight-owl movie. Well, Will remembers that he had had a scotch or two — or possibly three — and he was in a rather warm, pleasant state when the fellow walked in. The fellow was about medium height, with reddish-brown hair, and he had the most intense ice-cold blue-eyes Will had ever seen. Otherwise, a typical hardboiled New Yorker. But as Will kept watching him, he began to sense something poetic in the man — something that made him merge into the background of East Indian shadows and colorful batik designs.

Of course, it could have been the one or two scotches — or possibly three. At any rate, the fellow seemed to be keeping a private eye on a couple sitting in front of the bar. Then the escort-half of the couple crossed glances with that pair of ice-cold blue eyes — and things began to happen. The escort whispered to his companion, the couple left the bar, got their coats, and departed in haste — without even taking time to look back; and just like that, Mr. Ice-cold Eyes plunked down his beer and followed the trail.

Maybe there was no connection between the couple on the run and the 59th Street Runner. Will isn't sure, and doesn't care: because from that night on, Mr. Ice-cold existed for Will. That night Mike O'Shaunessey was born — the tough New York shadow with a poetic soul and a flair for the exotic, the Irish private-eye who, in polyglot New York, somehow finds himself involved in romantic adventures out of distant lands — the melting-pot manhunter with a heart of gold. . . .

THE SHADOW AND THE SHADOWED

by WILL OURSLER

BEFORE me tonight on my office desk lies the folder. On the manila cover, neatly typed in the upper left-hand corner, is its grim little legend: *Vashti Evir, alias Eve. Deceased.*

So be it. There are those who call the case my greatest washout. Mike

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O'Shaunessey's most fantastic flop, they like to say. And they may be right. I wouldn't be sure.

My part in the Vashti Evir extravaganza began on a sticky August night in New York. My first scrawled note in the folder, in fact, is dated August 21: *Mr. Timar Hambul will pay a large chunk of cash — to keep a lady alive for three days.*

Timar Hambul had made his appointment by phone for seven thirty. I was waiting alone — here in our offices on West 46th Street — when he showed up. He came in at a slow swagger which gave me a chance to note the gray spats, the gleaming ebony cane, the little waxed mustache.

Friend Hambul was a man of weighty affairs. He wasted no time coming to his point. He favored me with a curt Arabic bow, introduced himself in his pure Oxonian accent, and stated with patronizing familiarity, "I'm in trouble, old man. I need your help. Following people, I'm told, is your business specialty."

I didn't answer. Shadowing to me is half-profession, half-art, and around it I've built my life and career. I have followed men and women on a hundred missions — from one side of the earth to the other. I stayed with one man nearly two years, and he did not even suspect.

The pompous little Arabian leaned on his cane. "You must keep her alive," he whispered. "My Vashti. You must keep her from harm. Only until Saturday, until our wedding. It is worth many dollars, O'Shaunessey. Ten thousand American dollars."

I leaned back in my desk chair, lighted my pipe. For no good reason I could think of I wanted to tell him to go to hell. Under the circumstances, I restrained the impulse. Instead, I asked, "Your Vashti — from whom is she in danger?"

His delicately curved lips twisted. "From herself! From a devil in her mind which would destroy her. It is pitiable, yes. But it will change — vanish — after we are married."

Pinpoints of light came into his dark eyes. "When she is with me, or with her parents, I do not fear. But she has threatened foolish things. And when she goes out alone, unwatched —" He shrugged. "It is then *you* must watch her, must protect her from her foolishness."

There were echoes in his story of the perfumed bondage of the East. But he was using legal American tender. He counted out $2000 in crisp twenties. The rest would come, he informed me smoothly, at the conclusion of the wedding ceremony.

I switched on a desk lamp, reached out, and picked up the bills.

I insisted on details, naturally. With these, plus bits of gossip I'd read in the social columns, I was able to jot down Fill-In 1 for the files:

"Subject: Vashti Evir. Age nineteen. Hair black. Eyes ditto. Skin light olive. (But high coloring of cheeks and lips, in gospel according to Hambul.) Weight about 125. Height five feet three.

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"Betrothed Timar Hambul. Age about 35 (he says). Marriage arranged by families in time-honored tradition. Wedding set for ten A.M. Saturday morning, August 25.

"Families Saudi-Arabian aristocracy. Floating-international set. Here on protracted vacation. Both sides loaded for bear with Arabian oil, so money no object. Anxious to unite powerful clans.

"Vashti wants out. Timar and the others won't let her off the hook. He tells me, 'She carries a little gun of pearl and insists she will blow off her pretty head, rather than marry me. But she will learn to love me, of course. After Saturday.'

"Why doesn't the lady take a run-out powder? Hambul says there isn't a chance. They would follow her to the last corner of the world. She knows they would find her, wherever she might go. It would be a matter of their high honor.

"Seems like she's beginning to play with the idea that they couldn't follow so easily into Mohammed's third heaven for unmarried maidens."

I was waiting, early the next day, just beyond the Park Lane's main entrance, as she came out. In the crowded street I managed to move in for a "close-up" of this poised Arabian lovely, as she stood a moment in the shadow of the portico.

She carried herself like some lovely ancient queen — with chromium trimmings. Cool serenity rode in the dark eyes and on the rounded red lips. But she was young and vibrant and alive. Hardly the sort to be planning self-destruction.

I took in the costume. Alligator shoes with Cuban heels. And alligator purse to match. Gray-green tailored suit that must have been made just for her. A tiny green sports hat with a feather. Brown suede gloves. On one wrist, I noticed, she wore a gold-link bracelet.

She made quite a picture waiting there, while the doorman signaled for a cab.

I followed in another taxi, of course. I'd notified Louie to be on hand. Louie and his cab have worked with me for many years — on a variety of problems in pursuit.

"Follow the dame," I told him, "but not too close. I may be hopping in and out. I've got a notion we're just on a shopping tour."

My notes of that morning in the folder:

"Subject stopped at a number of stores along 57th Street, between Fifth and Seventh Aves. Milgrim's. Bendel's. Bergdorf. Annine's Gowns. Several other small shops. Subject made no purchases. Tried on twelve hats, four dresses, two coats, eleven pairs of shoes. Showed no sign of suicidal intentions.

"At 11:23 A.M. subject dismissed waiting taxi. Paid driver five dollars, took no change. At corner of 57th and Seventh, subject took plebian bus, headed down Seventh Ave. Followed in Louie's cab. Subject left bus at 34th St. and entered Macy's

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department store. Continued to shadow on foot.

"Subject highly uncertain. Looked over compacts in cosmetics dept. Also lipsticks. Examined odds and ends at ribbon and sewing counter. Tried on green bedroom slippers — special price $2.93 — at sale counter on main floor. Did not purchase.

"Subject visited basement. Counter-shopped, but still purchased nothing. Then started upstairs via escalator. Stopped at each floor, beginning with second, to examine items of merchandise. Articles examined from basement to eighth floor include: slips, nightgowns, coats, hardware, wicker furniture, sporting goods, lawn mowers, garden hoses, kitchen linoleum.

"Arriving eighth floor, subject went directly to rug department. Pretended to look over rugs but now seemed highly nervous. Constantly glancing around. After about three jittery minutes a tall good-looking young man in a high straw hat swung around the corner.

"I was about fifteen feet distant, engrossed in bathmats, as they greeted each other. Could not hear what they said. But saw them clasp hands and talk in low, earnest tones, standing very close together."

She was not free, of course. She was out of the shackled world of the East. But she could not be her own agent, not even here in the mundane magnificence of Macy's rug department.

I watched them as they talked together, standing by a pile of rugs. They looked like any young couple in love. Once he leaned close and I saw his lips brush hers. She drew away quickly and glanced around. I lost myself behind the bathmats.

It lasted only a few brief moments, this secret rendezvous. I saw him press her hand and then she turned and started toward the escalator marked *Down*.

Half a minute later, I followed.

I was starting to wonder about Mr. Hambul's story. It didn't add up. Would a girl like this be plotting to take her own life? Or could the whole thing be an alibi for himself that Hambul was carefully building up in advance?

I did not mention the rendezvous when I phoned Hambul that night with my first report. My job was to keep the lady alive through Saturday morning. What she did otherwise, I reasoned, was her own business. And I had no desire to find myself in the middle of any Arabian triangle.

I did give him a running account of the shopping tour. I explained that I had operatives on duty outside the hotel, in the lobby, and in the suite across from hers, where our man would keep an eye on the corridor.

But I also reminded him that we couldn't be responsible for anything she might try within the sacred confines of her hotel suite.

Hambul insisted that was the least of his worries. "Her parents are always there, old man," he confided.

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And added with obvious relish, "Besides, her maidservant is actually in my employ. Never lets the turtle-dove out of sight. It is only when Vashti leaves those — those sacred confines. Only then —"

Always the perfectly logical answer. But I decided the moment had come to try him on what seemed an odd inconsistency. "Why not just take that little pearl-handled piece of death from her?" I asked in a casual tone. "The way you've got her hemmed in, it ought to be a cinch."

His reply was strictly of the East. The trapped animal only grows more desperate when it knows it is trapped. And she could obtain another weapon easily enough. "Better to pretend we take her threats lightly, to let her think she has escape at her fingertips."

We kept a round-the-clock vigil for the next two days. There was never a moment, except when she was within those sacred precincts of the hotel suite, when a Mike O'Shaunessey operative was not close at hand, ready to spring into action at the first suicidal gesture.

Only — there was no such gesture. With each hour that passed, I grew more dubious of Mr. Hambul and his extravagant fears. Yet far from diminishing, his terror seemed to mount to greater pitch each time I called.

"She calls me twelve kinds of a fool," he mourned. "She would die a hundred times before she would be mine. I have even tried to take away the little gun, but she prevents me. She sleeps now with the purse beneath her pillow." A long, almost wistful sigh. Then, "O'Shaunessey, you must not let her out of your sight! Not for a moment! Is that perfectly clear?"

I said we'd do our best.

She had several more of those secret meetings with her young man. They were always brief encounters in out-of-the-way places. On one of these occasions, my operative clumsily moved in too close. He was collared by the boy friend.

From the operative's report of the incident:

"This unfortunate thing occurred, as I say, in the Piscatorial Division — that is, the fish department — at the Museum of Natural History. The tall fellow grabbed me and wanted to know what I thought I was doing. I told him I was just looking at the fish, that it was a hobby of mine. He made a sound like a snort, then he said:

" 'I don't know who you're working for but whoever it is, tell the jerk something for me, will you? Tell him I'm no Arabian prince. But I'm going to marry Eve — that's what I call her, Eve — and we're going to live in a two-bit quonset some place and play canasta and eat hamburgers and have babies, just like anybody else.'

"He went on that way. From his jabbering I gathered he'd met the subject first in Paris during the war, when he was a GI. Her family must

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have busted it up. But he must have nearly blown his top when he read about her coming to America and getting engaged to the other guy.

"While they were talking — before the guy crabbed the play — the only thing I heard distinctly was the name Joe Kelly. Don't know if it referred to him or somebody else."

Friday night she was still alive, I was reasonably sure. My night watches were at their posts — the man at the open door across the corridor and the one in the lobby downstairs. And I myself was watching the windows from the shadows across the street.

In just about twelve hours it would be over. Hambul would have wed his turtle-dove and I would have my fee. Hambul had preened himself, when I talked with him earlier. "Only a little while longer," he had murmured ecstatically. "I am so grateful. I would like to pay you in glittering gold coins. But it will have to be in dirty dollar bills."

Dirty dollar bills were okay with O'Shaunessey.

The lights in her room went out about ten. Half an hour later the lights in the rest of the suite went out too. The bride-to-be and her entourage had retired to their fitful rest.

I stood near the corner, just out of range of the street light. As the hours lengthened, the hush of this August night deepened. In the folder I find a note I scrawled as I waited, *It's too quiet. Is our pal Joe going to take this lying down? What the devil gives, anyway?*

About midnight, I heard the whistle.

It came from the open window on the third floor — in the suite across from hers. This was the prearranged signal from my operative. It meant the little lady was on her way out.

A moment later I saw her hurry through the entrance and into a cab.

With a curious, perverse pleasure, I realized I had no way of stopping her. I couldn't call in the police — she was committing no crime. And I had no intention of trying force.

My one bet was to leap into Louie's cab and take off in pursuit.

Here, from my notes in the folder:

"In Louie's cab trailed Vashti, alias Eve, on winding, irrational course. Subject apparently aware she was being followed. Seemed to be making a game of weaving in and out of side streets, Louie following with unprintable epithets. At 101st Street and Park, subject got out of cab. Paid fare.

"Louie switched off lights, parked half a block away. Subject stood waiting on street corner. In about two minutes a dark battered coupe pulled up by the girl. Man driving. Looked as if there might be third party in car. Subject got into coupe and they drove off.

"Continued tailing. Coupe drove at high speed, heading mainly west. Finally hit Hudson River Parkway. Continued north on Parkway to point just beyond the George Washington

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Bridge. Coupe pulled over onto grass and stopped. Subject and man got out.

"Couple headed toward shadows along bank of river. Louie pulled up on grass and I followed pair on foot. Saw them stop by tree close to embankment railing. About ten feet below were the swirling currents of the Hudson."

I remember tonight the sudden panic of that moment. Vashti and her boy friend were too close to that rail. It was too easy, too handy an exit, if they had elected that dire way out.

Of course it was insane. I was letting Timar Hambul and his welter of alarms distort my thinking. This was only another rendezvous — a few last stolen moments together. Nothing more.

They were barely twenty feet from me. But the forms were vague in the darkness. It seemed to me that they had some sort of package with them, but I couldn't be sure. One instant they were in my line of vision; the next, the foliage hid them.

For a long moment they were locked in embrace, silent, motionless, their lips clinging. At last they drew apart and talked in low hurried tones that I could not make out, whispers that were like little gusts of night.

Then abruptly Vashti Evir whirled. She seemed to be peering into the shadows, directly at the spot where I crouched, hidden and motionless.

"You there," she called out. "You in the darkness! I know you're there. Well, listen to me. You can't stop me, do you hear? I don't care how many of you there are. You can't stop me now, none of you!"

A pause. Then, "Do you hear me, up there? Do you understand what I'm saying? I won't be hemmed in. *I won't be hemmed in, ever again!*"

Her shouting attracted the attention of the man at the filling station, fifty yards away. He was standing outside, looking around, probing the darkness with his flashlight.

The flashlight found her. I couldn't see the man with her, only the girl. She was alone, by that rail. And it was then, at that moment — in that grotesque, impossible spotlight — that it happened. Vashti Evir, alias Eve, twisted like a dancer in a pirouette and flung her beautiful body over that rail and down into the river.

My reaction was automatic. I'm a strong swimmer. I couldn't let her die like that. I was throwing off my coat while running forward. At the rail I could make out her form swirling in the water.

There were sounds around me — the engine of the coupe starting up, Louie the cab driver running toward me, and the filling-station man yelling, "She jumped! I saw the girl jump!"

I kicked off my shoes and plunged over the rail.

She was there in the water ahead of me, not forty feet distant, a gray ghostly form in the shadowy half-light on the river. But there was no

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sound, no cry from those lips, no splash of struggle.

I lunged toward her with desperate strokes. But even as I swam I knew I was too late. I seemed to have known that from the start, as though it were a prearranged pattern I could not alter.

Ahead of me, she seemed to quiver an instant — then to sink. The swirling currents pulled her down into the darkness below.

There was only empty silence when I reached the spot. But a few feet off in the shadows I made out a small object. It was bobbing up and down on the tiny waves like an impudent signal of triumph — Vashti Evir's little green hat with the cocked feather.

It was when I reached out and grabbed the hat that I made the discovery. There was something clinging to the lining, some foreign substance which was sticky against my fingers. Uncertain what it was, I tried to dismiss the vagrant possibility that crossed my thoughts.

For a few moments I treaded water. There was no other sound. She had won her victory, just as she had promised.

The filling-station man's flashlight was searching the water, trying to pick me up. I turned and started back to shore. In one hand I clutched the little green hat.

The notes in the folder read:

"Vashti Evir, alias Eve. Drowned in plunge in Hudson River, near George Washington Bridge, Aug. 24. Body not recovered. Believed swept out to sea.

"Man with her just before suicide dive apparently fled in terror. Has not been located. No clues whatever to his identity.

"My story of suicide plunge verified by Louis Maddox, cab driver, and Paul O'Rourke, filling-station attendant. Both, like myself, saw her dive over the rail.

"Hambul claims Vashti put sleeping pills in the milk of maidservant on night of suicide. Holds me responsible, however. Has made variety of unpleasant threats. But is sailing for Paris in morning."

Vashti's parents and entourage returned to their white stucco domains in the Near East. Hambul, I learned, married a handsome French widow, in a sumptuous wedding in Paris.

The case of Vashti Evir was virtually forgotten, except by some of my competitors who like to recall it as Mike O'Shaunessey's most abject defeat — when he watched $8,000 in fees wash down the Hudson River.

But, of course, they haven't all the facts. Not quite all. Because in recent months we've begun to hear rumors. Rather curious rumors which drift into the office from a variety of sources. Reports concerning a Mr. and Mrs. Joe Smith and family living in one of those peaceful, Sunday-come-to-meeting communities somewhere out in the Middle West.

No precise details. They say he's an engineer and they live in a small

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cottage and have a couple of kids and a garden and a porch with wicker furniture.

Only thing unusual about them is Mrs. Smith. Seems she's a kind of mystery woman in town — a raven-haired, olive-skinned lovely who carries herself like an Oriental queen and could be a belle of local society except that she spends all her time with the husband and kids.

I never bothered checking the rumors. I had it figured out anyway — from the moment I realized what that foreign substance was that stuck to my fingers when I grabbed the little green hat.

The police assumed that substance was just a bit of flotsam from the river. After all, they had the evidence of Vashti's numerous suicide threats, and eye-witnesses who saw her make the fatal dive. They treated it as a routine suicide all the way. And I didn't attempt to change their minds.

Fact is, I really had no proof. It was only a suspicion on my part that her suicide threats to the terrible Hambul were all phony, that she had framed the whole show to give her the perfect way out. Or that what really dived into the river — just an instant before she and her Joe fled to the battered coupe and sped off into the night — was a weighted straw dummy which would sink swiftly, disintegrate, and slip out to sea.

As I say, nothing but suspicion. I could never see any reason to mention such a wild possibility to anyone, not even to the police. And I could see nothing whatever to be gained.

But sometimes, looking at the little green hat with the cocked feather, and the dried bits of straw inside, I find it hard to hold back a smile — an $8,000 O'Shaunessey smile . . .

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In his ESTHÉTIQUE DU ROMAN POLICIER *(1947), of which a new and revised edition will soon be published, Thomas Narcejac, one of the best of the contemporary French detective-story writers, gives his opinions on mystery writing in general and mystery authors in particular. It is unfortunate that from a comprehensively historical viewpoint M. Narcejac is not aware of, or not too familiar with, certain aspects of the genre; for example, his book fails even to take cognizance of the hardboiled technique or the Had-I-But-Known school; perhaps the new edition will fill in these omissions.*

M. Narcejac feels strongly that the detective story, in all its manifestations, is not a contradiction but an extension of the adventure tale. His definition of the ferreting form is interesting: a detective story, he says, is a narrative in which reasoning creates the terror — and then is obliged to allay it. . . .

Perhaps the most appropriate test for Thomas Narcejac's definition is his own work. You will recall M. Narcejac's first story in EQMM — "The Vampire," in the March 1950 issue. Surely this story created terror, not only in the chief character's mind but in the mind of every reader who vicariously followed in the footsteps of the doomed man. Now, we give you Thomas Narcejac's "The Police Are on the Stairs." Will you feel the terror again — before it is allayed?

THE POLICE ARE ON THE STAIRS

by THOMAS NARCEJAC

(translated by Anthony Boucher)

July 10: I have myself perfectly in hand. That is why I allow myself to write these lines. Later on I shall be glad to reread today's impressions, to know just what sort of man I was immediately after the murder which I had arranged so meticulously. What I feel is, as a matter of fact, strange and hard to put down. No trace of regret, of course. He had tortured me long enough. Ah, the way his face twisted when he recognized me! The way his chin trembled! He was incapable even of reaching for his revolver. I am not through savoring this picture inside of me . . . Fifteen years to wait! And suddenly that wretched face with its bulging eyes — no, certainly no regret. But no relief either. He did not suffer enough. Or am I sure of that? As my blade drew near his neck, his mouth opened wide

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and I saw his tongue trembling back toward his throat like a cowering beast. I think he died at the very moment when he felt the knife prick his skin. Yes; he suffered . . . But what about me? Fifteen years of agony . . . Oh, if only I could kill him again! I am not appeased. Even if every day and every night I could savor the smell of his blood flowing from my wound, he would still escape me. When I killed him, I freed him from fear.

And still I can take pride in this murder. Not one mistake, not one hesitation. Old Martine left the house at the hour I had planned. The dog died at the hour I had planned. The keys, at the hour I had planned, opened the doors without a sound. With my rubber gloves I could search the desk without a fear of prints, and carry off to destroy all the threatening letters I have been sending him every month. And under the letters I found Christiane's picture. Your picture, Christiane. He had not dared to get rid of it. It had turned yellow. Your face looked worn, but your eyes glowed as they did fifteen years ago. You are avenged, my love. I shall never know where you were buried, what agonies accompanied your last hours on earth. You called out for me, I am sure — how the wretch must have laughed! But he has paid for it, and you smile at me across the mist of time. I have the right, now, to call up the memory of you. You belong to me; he no longer stands between us.

But am I still sure that I love you, now that I am no longer able to hate him?

That is being foolish. My murder is so perfect a crime that no one will ever know why that man was murdered — and this thought worries me. I wish that people could know my love and my hate — know the well-earned punishment which I have administered. I feel too safe. I am condemned to carry by myself the burden of those fifteen years of desolation, misery, and tears. If I were to be arrested, I could still blacken his memory. But that would dishonor Christiane. I must keep silence. I must hide myself as best I can. But what a shame that the most beautiful murder of the century must go unnoticed!

I must confess that my curiosity is strongly roused. How will the police react? Of course they will be forced to understand that they are dealing with no ordinary murderer. I had never thought of the strange delight of realizing that the finest brains in the city are at this moment devoting all of their energy to solving the puzzle which I myself have posed to them. How did he get in? What weapon did he use? Did he leave prints? Gentlemen, I regret to inform you that those questions have no answer for you. I withdrew the knife. I wiped it on the sleeve of his pajamas. I washed off the blood in the bathroom. I took off the rubber gloves, washed them well, and put them on again before I searched his office drawer by drawer. Then I

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came back into his bedroom. I looked at the disordered bed, the blood-stained bedspread, the expression on the corpse's face, and I thought, "What a fine scene to describe! What an assignment for a reporter!" And then I went out, closing the doors behind me. Unseen, unrecognized, unknown.

But how the shedding of blood can change a man! I entered that house as a shamefaced executant of justice; and now — I do not quite know how to express this — I feel free — even, in a way, happy. I feel that something is being born within me. It is as if an uncertain mistrust, an evil timidity, had departed from me. For so long I have lived under the oppression of jealousy. That man drove me away, in the very presence of Christiane, and I did not have the courage to snatch from him the woman who had been my mistress. And for fifteen years I have groped my way without being able to find . . . even myself. And now I shall live, live . . .

July 11: Nothing. Not a word in the papers. They must not have found the body yet. I am somewhat disappointed. Or is it really a disappointment? Yes; I think I should have felt a trace of fear which would have added a fresh savor to life. The sun is bright today. A woman smiled at me in the street. Therefore I do exist. I am to be seen. But no word . . . Murder is too easy.

July 11: 6 p.m. So here it is. A brief last-minute item, and in a bad spot to boot. I almost missed it. So now they know. The machinery has started. But I am calm — even a little tired. For forty-eight hours I've been living on my nerves. This evening I shall treat myself to a restaurant meal. I am sick of chops fried on a hot plate, of boiled eggs gulped down distractedly, of everything. I am sick of being alone. To rub up against the crowd! To talk — ah, to talk, no matter to whom! Life begins this evening. I shall go to a concert. I shall come home through the indifferent streets and I shall not be thinking about anything at all. I have been freed from an obsession; I have a right to happiness in my turn. Christiane, let me try to be happy, just for an instant, like other people. I have been cloistered within my revenge. Can anyone know what I have endured? I have experienced everything: poverty, contempt, doubt, despair, envy, hate . . . I all but committed suicide. For eleven months I hoarded my money sou by sou and finally succeeded in buying a revolver. It still is there, in the drawer of my night table. Eleven months of fever, and then I triumphed over the temptation and resumed my existence of patient hate. Christiane, I want very much to live!

July 12: I had expected something better. A short notice on page one. *Murder by Madman.* Madman, indeed! If I knew the idiot who wrote that headline, I'd teach him the sort of man he was dealing with! But the

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report is worth copying — a fine specimen of contemporary stupidity:

> "Yesterday, shortly after noon, Madame Martine Soissons returned from a trip to discover the mutilated body of her employer, former Minister Hector Delesplanques. He had been killed by a knife-thrust in the throat. The rooms had been searched, but theft is not believed to have been the motive of the crime. Hector Delesplanques practised law, was elected Deputy from Arras, and became Minister of Commerce in 1922. A year later he retired from politics and traveled abroad extensively, settling down to live for many years in Detroit. He returned to France several months ago and lived in a quiet villa in Neuilly, where he was writing his memoirs. His servant, Madame Soissons, has stated to us that she knows of no enemies of her late master. We learn as we go to press that the police are in possession of several interesting clues and are following a significant trail. An arrest is imminent."

There you are. For days and nights I, Augustin Larronde, devote myself to arranging this whole business. I had the idea of luring Martine away with a telegram; I had the idea of poisoning the dog; I had the idea of disguising myself as a man from the gas company to take impressions of the locks. And now not a word about the telegram, not a word about the dog — of course they couldn't know about the locks. And I forgot the rubber gloves — weren't they a perfect device? And still this imbecile can find nothing better to say than *Murder by Madman!* It's enough to make a man disgusted with his own intelligence!

No, it would not be right to leave the public in ignorance any longer. They have to know that this former Minister, this great and honest man, deeply dishonored me. I loved his wife and she loved me. What is wrong with that? I was only a secretary, a poor devil with 600 francs a month. He insulted me. In front of Christiane he ridiculed me. And then he left for America. Now Christiane hated him. She told me so. Who's to make anyone believe that she went with him of her own free will? And he must have spied on her incessantly — I never received a line from her. She died over there, far away from me. Oh, Christiane, some time, when I have enough money, I will follow you over there — I will find out where he abandoned you. But in the meantime I shall tear the mask from his face and reveal his iniquity to the world. Madman, indeed!

I must cry the truth from the rooftops.

July 12: 9:30 p.m. I have mailed the letter. I composed it with extreme care. I did not speak of myself, but I gave such details that they are bound to take me seriously. Now we shall see if I am mad!

July 13: Nothing really new in the paper. This journalistic style disgusts me. So "the police have made a discovery"! And what discovery, pray? I took every precaution with the telegram; they need not think that the police have a monopoly on cleverness. And the dog — ah, there's a real stumbling block for them! I made up

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that poison myself. It was a nuisance, but I had the time. Time is one thing I have always had enough of . . . They are keeping the public entertained in order to avoid confessing their own impotence. They are baffled. I baffle them. And I'm not through baffling them.

July 14: It is hard to be happy. I do not quite know how to go about it. No doubt I work at it too intensely. I have always worked too hard at things. My teachers used to say that I was bookish. I should like to slow up, to let myself drift. I cannot. But I must confess that today was lovely. I went to a music hall. I know of nothing more stupid than music halls; but the crowd was so tight-pressed, so unanimous in its gross joy, that I forgot myself for a moment. I forgot to be a poor wretch followed by phantoms. I sang, and when I noticed that I was singing, I all but wept. The madman all but wept! Then I sat at a sidewalk café and watched the passersby and toyed with an ice. It began to get cold. Then I went to the races. I lost ten francs. From that moment on I began to yield once more to a vague sadness. Was it because evening was coming on, because I dreaded the return to this wretched hotel room? Was it the memory of that fat man with the mustache whom I saw at the café and then at the races and then again in the bus? Sadness can feed on such a meagre diet. And my own sadness finds so much nourishment in dreams. I woke up happy, and now I feel old, worn out, dried up. They are playing jazz downstairs in the café. I shall go down and drink beer until the waiter piles up the chairs and sprinkles sawdust under the tables. Then I shall go to bed, unless the man who lives on the floor below asks me in for some endless card game. When I killed Delesplanques, I lost my reason for living. Can I give up my accustomed poisons?

July 15: Not the least mention of the Neuilly murder. Did they throw my letter in the wastebasket?

July 16: Saw the fat man with the mustache again. It's funny. He has taken a room here. He gives his occupation as traveling salesman. How likely does that sound?

July 17: My hand is still trembling and my writing goes all wrong. . . . They were right when they talked about clues. How could it have happened? I thought out everything in advance but that. It must have been when I was wiping off the knife. The blade slipped and touched the rubber. But I didn't feel anything. . . . However it happened, the fact is unalterably there: the index finger of my right glove is slit at the end. I noticed the damage just now when I was powdering my gloves. The slit is invisible, but when the glove is on the hand it opens. At the least pressure the skin makes contact with the object the glove is touching. I must have scattered fingerprints all over.

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Fortunately the police have never had occasion to take my prints. But they are diabolically clever when it comes to prints. I thought I was safe. Am I perhaps already surrounded by my enemies? Now I understand why the papers are so silent. Normally this affair should have made headlines comparable to those on Landru or Weidmann. I was astonished at the discretion of the reporters. But now I see. Police orders. Don't warn him. We want to take him alive. You'll have a time doing that, my friends! From today on, I shall not be separated from my revolver. It is small, but it will do. And it may cost you dear to come too close to me!

But possibly I am wrong to yield to discouragement. "How you do love melodrama!" Christiane used to say to me so often. Did I really leave fingerprints? I did touch all sorts of papers in the desk, that's the worst of it. But admitting that my index finger did touch various documents, the slit in the glove is narrow — the print would be hard to make out. But they do now have a point of departure. From there to me. . . . No, all is not yet lost. Rather say we are just beginning the exciting part of the game . . .

July 18: Nothing worth writing down. I am not being followed — of that I am absolutely sure. I went for a long walk all morning; I took the subway; I strolled around the Luxembourg; I went down the boulevard Saint-Michel. No one behind me. So they have still not found a thing. Nevertheless, it was a mistake to write to them.

July 19: I have not slept all night. How innocent I was! They had no need to follow me: *they are here!* I should have known they are not given to empty boasting. If they say they are following a trail, it is no mere bluff. I was right to worry, but how could I have foreseen so daring a maneuvre? It was when I was going to bed last night that I abruptly discovered the truth. I was thinking over the small events of the day when suddenly I remembered a tiny incident after dinner. The fat man with the mustache had started up to his room when he stopped and asked me for a light. I am convinced: that man is from the police.

Let me recapitulate: his path crossed mine on July 14, the day after they received my letter. On July 16 he came to live here. Since then I have seen him every day; he has had ample opportunity to keep a watch on me. This cannot be a coincidence. For one thing, he is too punctual; he comes when I come, goes when I go. This makes one think. And why should he ask me for a light? Why should he stare at me so insistently? For now that I think of it, I remember that he fixed his eyes on mine as if he wished to engrave my face on his memory. A strange traveling salesman indeed! He does not travel. And I would swear that the mustache is false.

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What am I to do? Burn the gloves? Impossible. Throw them in the Seine, perhaps? No. I shall slice them into thin strips and scatter them about everywhere. The gloves are the only dangerous items; this journal I always carry on me, with the revolver and the knife. The police are clever, but I am not myself devoid of ideas. As they shall soon come to realize . . .

July 20: That's done. My gloves have disappeared in the vastness of Paris. And high time, for I have learned that my neighbor on the left is the traveling salesman. Lebréchet, Jules the porter says he is called. Lebréchet has just reëntered his room; I recognized his blue coat through my keyhole. This is frightful. Every day he gives them a report on me and when they are fully documented they will pounce without warning. But I think . . .

My suspicion was correct. Just beside the clothes cupboard there is a small hole, concealed by the design of the wall paper. From this observation post Lebréchet can see my bed. This is terrible. When Lebréchet rented the room next to mine, it was with the object of spying on me day and night. He took advantage of my absence to drill the hole . . . or holes?

Yes. I have found two more holes, so cleverly made that one might almost swear they were the natural flaws of a rat-trap such as this wretched dwelling. Oh, they are astute, my friends the police! One hole is across from the washbasin, the other in line with the window. If Lebréchet keeps shifting position, he can watch me almost continuously. I could ask for another room, but the hotel is full — and that would be admitting that I have noticed Lebréchet. No, we must play the game out and teach them who is cleverer.

July 20: 2:30 p.m. I never thought of this: if he was spying, he must have seen me hunting out the holes! No, not necessarily. He must lose sight of me when I keep close to the wall. Then he does not know that I know. Nor does he know that I, in turn, can keep watch on him. Should I plug up the holes? I wonder. On the one hand, I should no longer feel myself pursued even into my poor privacy; but on the other, I should warn him that I know and he would simply drill other holes. No. When the feeling of being watched becomes unbearable, I shall lie down on the floor at the foot of the wall and thus escape him.

His door has just clicked. He is going off to make his report. . . . Yes, he's turned the corner of the street; now it is my turn to take a look at the enemy's quarters . . .

Nothing sensational, of course. Furniture much like mine. A suitcase on the bed. A dirty shirt dangling from a chair. I had thought one would see a wider expanse through the holes. In fact, there exist, between the explorable sections of the room, zones of invisibility which I shall mark out with chalk on the floor of

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my own room. I shall live in these blind spots and reveal to him only those details of my existence which it pleases me to make known to him.

July 21: I have considered every aspect of the problem and find one inescapable conclusion: they are trying to make me nervous, to force me to lose my head.

Proofs?

You ask for proofs? I have proofs for you. Those holes in the wall — I suppose those are not proofs, eh? You see, I am accustomed to clear thinking. I have never been so cold, so lucid. I know what I am saying. But if you insist on further proofs, I shall furnish them. It is evident that the enemy will try to enter my room. Very well, I shall provide him with every facility for his tour of inspection. My demonstration must be a brilliant one. I must silence those who dare to doubt me.

July 21: 6:30 p.m. I have bought talcum powder and glue. Tomorrow morning I shall spread a fine coating of powder inside the cupboard, and I shall seal, with glue and hairs, everything that can be opened in the room.

What a ridiculous life they are driving me to lead! My mind is obsessed with the worries of self-defense. I devote my days to planning feints and maneuvers. Just when my heart had ceased to bleed, now the anguish begins again. Now I must struggle, struggle, and my God, why? Christiane, it is for my life that I now struggle. I am lost, I know it. And I shall carry to my grave that terrible uncertainty: why did you never write to me? Were you kept a prisoner? Or — oh, horrible thought — did Delesplanques succeed in killing for me your . . . love, you called it, but if he could uproot it, replace me. . . . Have I suffered and hated and killed for nothing?

No, it is impossible. Such a thought tears at me, shreds me. . . . Christiane! Who then will have pity on me, after all?

July 21: 8:30 p.m. When Lebréchet sat down at table he looked at me. I am not mistaken. *That man is afraid!* He is beginning to weigh the dangers which his profession forces him to incur. He went upstairs as soon as he had swallowed his last mouthful. I do not hear him now. He must be at his post, but I am sitting on the floor in blind spot number one. My suitcase serves as a writing desk. He can see nothing.

July 21: 10:00 p.m. I have been dreaming. It is growing dark. No noise next door; no light. An accordion is playing in the café.

July 21: 10:30 p.m. He has just bolted his door for the night. I imitated him. Water is running in his basin. Now he is taking off his shoes. He is walking around; the floorboards creak softly. His bed squeaks. He sighs. I am going to look.

July 21: 11:00 p.m. I have watched him at length. He is lying on his back, his hands crossed behind his head. His eyes are open. That is ter-

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rible, a man lying in bed with his eyes open. From time to time he picks at his teeth with a match-stick. He has just turned off the light. I shall not be able to sleep.

July 22: 6:30 a.m. He is yawning. He looks behind him, then yawns again. Now what is he up to? Ah! Was I wrong? You that wanted proofs! Lebréchet is standing in front of his mirror — *sticking his mustache back on!* Was I wrong to suspect him?

He indulged in some huggermugger under his bed, as if he was hiding something. Then he turned his eyes toward the wall — *my wall* — with a suspicious look. After that he finished dressing.

It seems to me that at this moment he has taken his turn and is watching me. As I write I can feel a sort of prickling running over me, a stiffening of every hair that means that his gaze is slowly traversing all my body. It comes and goes like the wanderings of a fly. It is rather agreeable . . .

I have just retired into blind spot number two. A moment later I heard his feet shifting. He is looking for me. Ah! another shift! He is moving to the third hole. I shall change position again . . .

Everything is arranged. The seals are posted. The nuisance of it is that now I can touch nothing myself. I must move about my miserable little room like an equilibrist surrounded by delicate porcelain. I am sitting in the middle of the room, writing on my knees. He is going out. Now his step is on the stairs. . . . In a few hours, I shall know.

July 22: 11:00 a.m. The clothes cupboard has been opened. I am not dreaming: the two hairs which I affixed to it are broken. Inside, the talcum is over everything. Opening the door produced an air current which scattered the fine powder. Yet everything is in order. You would swear that nothing has been moved. Then what is he looking for? He came in here. He did not hesitate a moment. He went straight for the cupboard, opened it, and closed it. What does this mean?

July 22: 12:45 p.m. This is terrifying. After breakfast I discreetly questioned Jules. He swears that Lebréchet did not return to the hotel between 7:30 and noon. He is sure, because from the kitchen where he works he can see everything that goes on. Then who broke the seal?

I myself?

July 22: 1:00 p.m. I myself.

For a quarter of an hour I have been searching my memory. Now I remember. I had been cleaning my revolver, and since I had some oil on my fingers, I washed my hands. Then automatically I opened the cupboard to get out a towel. It was so mechanical a gesture that it escaped my conscious memory.

Then no one entered the room. That is precisely what perturbs me. Logically, Lebréchet should have come. It is time for overt action. Since he did not take advantage of this opportunity, there must be some-

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thing else going on, something which I do not understand. But what? What?

July 22: 1:30 p.m. Through my shutters I have just caught sight of two singularly interesting characters, hats pulled down, coats buttoned up, marching in measured step. Policemen, beyond any doubt. So that is the answer. Lebréchet went to fetch them.

They went past the hotel. The taller one raised his eyes and carefully looked the place over. The sound of their steps went on down the street to the corner.

The net is closing in.

July 22: 3:00 p.m. Nothing new. I opened my shutters noisily and leaned out; the street is empty. I have had a slight nose-bleed; it has cleared my head. I seem to arrange my thoughts more readily. I begin to wonder if I am simply making up an absurd story from whole cloth.

July 22: 5:00 p.m. They went by again. They held a short conference at the corner and then departed. The siege has begun again.

July 22: 6:30 p.m. Lebréchet comes along, walking fast. He keeps looking behind him. Suddenly he raises his eyes to my window. I have just time to jerk back. Should I go down? But if they descend upon me. . . . I can defend myself better here.

July 22: 8:00 p.m. I went down for dinner and nothing happened. I noticed that Lebréchet always kept his eye on me. He ate very little. You would swear he was waiting for something serious to happen. I hid some slices of bread in my pockets. If I am forced to barricade myself in my room, at least I shall have food to sustain me. As a gesture of bravado, I have put the revolver on the table. When Lebréchet glues his eye to the wall, he will see the weapon clearly displayed. If he is afraid — and he will be — I shall gain perhaps twenty-four hours. After that . . .

It is odd how weak I feel in the face of death.

July 28: 8:30 a.m. Ate breakfast downstairs. Suddenly I got up and walked straight up to Lebréchet. He picked up his napkin abruptly and turned pale. I very politely asked him for sugar. He let out a sort of sigh of relief. After that he kept fumbling with his mustache, as though he felt it coming unstuck.

So I frighten them. They remember what happened to Delesplanques. I see what they are up to. They are studying my habits so that they can take me at the moment I am least prepared to offer any resistance. So: never turn my back to them. Always have behind me a wall, a table, some form of support. Use the staircase only when they are on duty elsewhere. I know my lesson.

July 28: 9:00 a.m. No. I missed one point of the lesson. If I wish to prevent any surprise attack, I must even give up eating in the public dining room.

July 28: 9:30 a.m. I asked Jules to bring my meals to my room. He

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grinned and made no answer. He has had his orders.

July 28: Noon. But Jules has graciously brought me a bowl of soup and a dish of spinach. I am not such a fool as to touch them. Their very scent is suspicious. And what a notion to bring me spinach! Everyone knows that that thick purée is ideal for concealing a narcotic. And the proof that they wish to force me to swallow their drugs is that they have carefully omitted any bread. If I am hungry, I must swallow the spinach. How clever I was to hide those crusts!

July 28: 12:30 p.m. Jules took away the untouched dishes. He looked at me oddly, shook his head, and slammed the door. Obviously my riposte has sowed consternation in their midst.

July 28: 2:15 p.m. Lebréchet has left the hotel.

July 28: 3:00 p.m. He is coming back. He seems excited. Now the two plainclothesmen appear at the corner. But they are doing nothing but pacing back and forth on the sidewalk, not too near the hotel. . . . A glance into Lebréchet's room has showed me the "salesman" engaged in making his bed. He was looking at something which he hastily slipped under the mattress. A weapon?

July 28: 3:30 p.m. Steps in the hall. If they knock, I'll shoot . . .

It was the manager. He did not open the door. He seemed suspicious. He asked if I was ill.

July 28: 5:00 p.m. They are clever devils. I almost fell into their snare. Just now they had a newsboy go along the street shouting: "Latest in the Delesplanques case! Fresh lead!" I did not hear all of it. I was at the door with my hand on the knob. The devils! They thought I would rush out into the street and *click* they'd have me. But I am not to be taken in so easily with these tricks. The newsboy has not appeared again.

July 28: 6:00 p.m. The two policemen have drawn closer. I am hungry. I have been sucking at an ancient scrap of bread I found in the clothes cupboard among the mothballs. It is something short of delicious — That scraping along the wall —

No, this is impossible! *Lebréchet has stopped up the holes!* At first I thought he had closed his blinds and darkened the room. Then I thought — and how I sweated at the thought! — that it was his own eye which kept me from seeing, that we were both peering through the same hole. But I finally convinced myself that the holes were blocked — probably he has glued bits of paper over them. But why? Are they going to pour gas into my room and asphyxiate me?

I must, in turn, take my own precautions. I have shoved the table up against the door and balanced my two chairs on top of it. This will provide a barricade which, if not a serious obstacle, will at least delay and confuse the enemy. And if I should chance to fall asleep (which is unlikely, overcome by weariness though I am) the noise will rouse me.

July 28: 8:00 p.m. Lebréchet did not go down to dinner. There is now only

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one policeman on the sidewalk. I cannot sit still. From time to time I plunge my head in the wash basin. I am at the end of my nerves. I can even wish that they would attack in force. They are waiting for night.

July 28: 8:30 p.m. It is the end of a beautiful evening. The sun has lingered longer than usual over the plane trees that border the Seine. Did these things once matter to me? I no longer know. . . . Now there are tears in my eyes as I look at my hands. To live. . . . But I shall make a good end, no matter what.

July 28: Midnight. Silence has come. There was whispering on the landing a few minutes ago. I took apart my barricade and went out in the hall. Everything is quiet. No light in Lebréchet's room. My revolver is ready. I have lowered the safety catch.

July 29: 1:00 a.m. I have just spent some time on the details of my appearance. Let them say: "Larronde was a well-groomed man." I keep my back to the bed. If I should yield to the desire to lie down a bit, I should be lost. I am cold. I think I am beginning to hate Christiane.

July 29: 4:10 a.m. Dawn is whitening the roof-tops. I feel sick. Physically, of course; I know my mental health.

July 29: 4:25 a.m. This is the end. The police are on the stairs. I could hear the steps creaking. With infinite precaution I slipped down to the end of the hall and leaned over. They were coming up slowly. The taller one has a pistol. By now they must be ready. I shall slip these notes into a book chosen at random. Some day they will fall into the hands of some idler who casually picks up the book. Let him understand, this man whose name I can never know, that I deserved a better fate.

And so life ends, this morning, at 4:25. I cannot help it.

At last I am free . . .

By telephone: "Hello, Chief. Sergeant Morucci speaking. It's all over. He didn't even put up a fight. Confessed right off the bat. Told us he'd known he was being followed for days and he'd about decided to turn himself in. He was passing himself off as a traveling salesman. . . . Yeah, not such a smart gag — But get this: he'd stuck on a false mustache to throw us off. Can you beat it? . . . What? The cash? . . . Oh, we found it all right. Hidden under the mattress. . . . That isn't all, Chief. The poor guy next door committed suicide. Augustin Larronde, his name was. Nervous, they say — sounds like a screw loose — private worries; you get the picture? . . . All right, I'm just telling you — to keep the record clear. Straight suicide-while-of-unsound, nothing for us. . . . Huh? Well, I'll be damned, Chief. You've got the Delesplanques killer! That *is* a break. Who was it? . . . A tramp, huh? . . . Oh, you'll make him talk, Chief — I know you. Congratulations!"

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By profession, Cyril Hare is a London barrister whose experience at the criminal bar has enabled him to create an authentic legal atmosphere in his detective novels. During the war he worked in various Government Departments, and for a number of years was in the office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. This experience added even more authenticity to his legal backgrounds, and his knowledge of English police organization and method, observed at first-hand, is reflected in every tale he has written.

Mr. Hare is a member of the Reform Club and the Detection Club — a curious combination. He has written articles and stories for "Punch," "Illustrated London News," and "Law Journal" — another curious combination. His latest detective novel, THE WIND BLOWS DEATH *(published in January 1950), concerns, among more legal and lethal matters, the works of Charles Dickens and music — still another curious combination. But the only curious combination involved in Mr. Hare's excellent short-short is the one referred to in the opening sentence below . . .*

MARGIN OF SAFETY

by CYRIL HARE

IT TAKES two to make a murder. The psychology of the murderer has been analyzed often enough; what qualifies a man to be murdered is a subject less frequently discussed, though sometimes, perhaps, more interesting.

Derek Walton, who was killed by Ted Brackley on a dank December evening in Boulter's Mews, Mayfair, was uniquely fitted for his part in that rather sordid little drama. He was a well-built young man, five feet eight inches tall, with dark hair and hazel eyes. He had a toothbrush mustache and walked with a slight limp. He was employed by Mallard's, that small and thriving jeweler's establishment just off Bond Street, and at the time of his death had in his pocket a valuable parcel of diamonds which Mallard had told him to take to Birmingham to be reset. The diamonds, naturally enough, provided the motive for the murder, but Walton would not have died exactly when and how he did had he been fat, or blue-eyed, or more than five feet nine, for Brackley was a cautious man. There was one other fact in Walton's life which finally loaded the scales against him — he was given to gambling on the dogs, and was fairly heavily in debt.

There was very little about Walton that Brackley did not know, after a period of intense study which had extended now for a matter of months. Patiently and remorselessly he had studied his quarry in every aspect.

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Every detail in his physical appearance, down to the least trick of gesture, gait, or accent, had been noted with a more than lover-like devotion. A creature of habit, Walton was an easy subject for observation, and his goings-out and comings-in had long since been learned by heart. Brackley knew all about the lodgings in West London where he lived, the pubs he frequented, the bookies he patronized, his furtive and uninteresting love affairs. More than once he had followed him to Birmingham, where his parents lived, and to the very doors of Walkinshaws, the manufacturing jewelers there who carried out the exquisite designs on which old Nicholas Mallard's reputation had been built. In fact, Brackley reflected, as he waited in the shadows of Boulter's Mews, about the only thing he did not precisely know about Walton was what went on inside his head. But that was an irrelevant detail, as irrelevant as are the emotions of a grazing stag to the stalker the moment before he presses the trigger.

Walton was a little later than usual that evening. Brackley took a quick glance at his wrist-watch and frowned. In ten minutes time the constable on his beat was due at the end of the Mews. He decided that he could allow himself another two minutes at the most. After that, the margin of safety would be too small, and the operation would have to be called off for the night. A later opportunity would offer itself, no doubt, and he could afford to wait, but it would be a pity, for the conditions were otherwise ideal. The shops had closed and the sounds of the last assistants and office workers hurrying home had long since died away. The tide of pleasure traffic to the West End had not yet set in. A faint mist, too thin to be called a fog, had begun to rise from the damp pavements. What on earth was keeping Walton?

The two minutes had still thirty seconds to run when Brackley heard what he was waiting for. Fifty yards away, in Fentiman Street, he heard the back door of Mallard's close, and the rattle of the key in the lock as Walton secured the premises behind him. Evidently, he was the last one out of the shop, as usual. There was a pause, long enough to make Brackley wonder whether his quarry had defeated him by deciding to walk out into Bond Street instead of taking his usual short cut through the Mews, and then he heard the unmistakable limping footsteps coming towards him. He realized, as he slid back into the open doorway behind him, that the steps were decidedly faster than usual. That was unfortunate, since everything depended on precise timing. Now at the critical moment, so long prepared, so carefully rehearsed, there would have to be an element of improvisation, and improvisation meant risk. Brackley had been to endless pains to eliminate risk in this affair. He resented having any put upon him.

After all, he need not have worried. The business went perfectly according

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to plan. As Walton passed the doorway, Brackley stepped out behind him. A quick glance to either side assured him that the Mews was deserted. He took two soundless paces in time with his victim. Then the rubber-handled cosh struck once, behind the right ear, precisely as he had intended, and Walton pitched forward without a groan.

The body never touched the ground. Even as he delivered the blow, Brackley had followed up and caught it round the waist with his left hand. For an instant he stood supporting it, and then with a quick heave lifted it onto his shoulder and carried it into the entry from which he had emerged. The whole incident had not taken more than ten seconds. There had been no sound, except the dull impact of the blow itself and the faint clatter made by the suitcase which Walton had been carrying as it fell to the ground. The case itself and Walton's hat, lying side by side in the gutter, were the only evidence of what had occurred. Within as short a space of time again Brackley had darted out once more and retrieved them. The door closed silently behind him. Boulter's Mews was as silent as a grave and as empty as a cenotaph.

Panting slightly from his exertions, but completely cool, Brackley went swiftly to work by the light of an electric torch. He was standing in a small garage of which he was the legitimate tenant, and he had laid the body upon a rug behind the tail-board of a small van of which he was the registered owner. The cosh was beside it. There had been little bleeding, and he had made sure that what there was had been absorbed by the rug. Quickly and methodically he went through Walton's pockets. The diamonds, as he expected, were in a small, sealed packet in an inside coat pocket. A brown leather wallet contained Walton's identity card, a few pound notes and some personal papers. Then came an agreeable surprise. In a hip pocket, along with a cheap cigarette case, was a thick bundle of pound notes. Brackley did not stop to count them, but he judged that there were a hundred of them, more or less. He grinned in the darkness. Other arrangements had compelled him to allow Walton to go to the dog races unattended during the last two weeks. Evidently Walton's luck there had turned at last — and just in time. He stuffed the notes along with the rest into his own pockets and then minutely examined the appearance of the dead man from head to foot.

What he saw satisfied him completely. Walton, that creature of habit, had dressed for his work that day in exactly the same clothes as usual. The clothes that Brackley was now wearing were identically the same. Brackley's shoulders were not quite so broad as Walton's, but a little padding had eliminated that distinction. Brackley stood only five feet seven inches in his socks, but in the shoes he had prepared for the occasion he looked as tall as Walton had been. A touch of dye had cor-

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rected the slight difference between the colors of their hair. Brackley stroked the toothbrush mustache which he had been cultivating for the last month and decided that the resemblance would pass.

No casual observer would have doubted that the man who limped out of the southern end of the Mews carrying a small suitcase was other than the man who had entered its northern end a scant five minutes earlier. Certainly the newspaper seller in Bond Street did not. Automatically he extended Walton's usual paper, automatically he made the same trite observation he had made to Walton every evening, and heard without comment the reply which came to him in a very fair imitation of Walton's midland accent. By a piece of good fortune, a policeman was passing at the time. He would remember the incident if the newspaper man did not. Walton's presence in Bond Street was now firmly established; it remained to lay a clear trail to Birmingham.

A taxi appeared at just the right moment. Brackley stopped it and in a voice pitched loud enough to reach the constable's ear told the man to drive to Euston. For good measure, he asked him if he thought he could catch the 6:55 train to Birmingham, and expressed exaggerated relief when the driver assured him that he had time to spare.

Walton always took the 6:55 to Birmingham, and traveled first-class at his firm's expense. Brackley did the same. By a little touch of fussiness and a slightly exaggerated tip, he contrived to leave an impression on the porter who carried his bag to the train which he hoped would be remembered. Walton always dined in the restaurant car. Brackley was of two minds whether to carry his impersonation that far. The car was well-lighted, and some of these waiters had long memories and sharp eyes. He decided to venture, and had no cause to regret it. The attendant asked him if he would have a Guinness as usual, and remarked that it was some time since he had seen him on that train and hadn't he grown a little thinner? Brackley, taking care not to show his teeth, which were more irregular than Walton's, agreed that he had, and drank off his Guinness in the rather noisy manner that Walton always affected. He left the dining car just before the train ran into New Street, taking care not to overdo the limp.

As he made his way back to his compartment he reflected with the conscious pride of the artist that the campaign had been a complete success. What was left to be done was comparatively simple, and that had been prepared with the same methodical detail as the rest. At New Street Station Walton would abruptly and finally disappear. His suitcase would go into the railway cloakroom, to be discovered, no doubt, in due course when the hue and cry for him had begun. Walking through carefully reconnoitred back streets, Brackley would make his way from the station

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to the furnished room where a change of clothes and identity awaited him. Next day, in London, the van in which Walton's body was now stiffening would drive quietly from Boulter's Mews to the garage in Kent where a resting place was prepared for its burden beneath six inches of newly-laid concrete. There would be nothing to connect that unobtrusive journey with a young man last seen a hundred miles the other side of London.

The trail would end at Birmingham, and there inquiries would begin — and end. Walton's parents, who were expecting him for the night, were unlikely to inform the police when he failed to arrive. The first alarm would probably be sounded by Walkinshaws, when the diamonds they were expecting were not delivered in the morning. Whether Walton's disappearance was held to be voluntary or not was an academic question which it would be interesting to follow in the newspaper reports. But he judged that when the state of Walton's finances was revealed, the police would be cynical enough to write him off as yet another trusted employee who had yielded to temptation when his debts got out of hand. A hunt for a live Walton, fugitive from justice, would be an additional assurance that Walton dead would rest undisturbed.

As the lights of New Street showed through the carriage windows, Brackley tested in his mind the links of the chain he had forged. Were they adequate? The newspaper seller — the taxi driver — the porter — the waiter — would they come forward when required? Would they remember him with certainty? Human testimony was fallible, after all, and the chain might snap somewhere. Yet short of proclaiming himself aloud as Walton on the station platform there was nothing further he could do.

He was gazing absently at the elderly lady who shared his compartment when it suddenly came to his mind that there was still something that might be done, a last artistic touch to put the issue beyond a doubt. Her suitcase was on the rack above her head, and his — Walton's — lay next to it. He noticed for the first time that they were remarkably alike. (It was a cheap line from Oxford Street, he knew. He had bought the twin of it himself in case it was wanted for his impersonation, but he had not needed it.) Seizing the chance which a kind fate provided, he rose quickly when the train stopped, took her bag from its place, and stepped out onto the platform.

It worked like a charm. Before he had limped half the length of the train his late companion had overtaken him, calling on him to stop.

"Excuse me," she piped, in a high, carrying voice, "but you've made a mistake. That's my bag you've got in your hand."

Brackley smiled tolerantly.

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake yourself, ma'am," he said. "You've got your own bag there. You see how alike they are."

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"But I'm *positive!*" the old lady shrieked. She was doing her stuff magnificently, as if she had been coached for the part. "It was right above my head and you took it. That's my bag you've got. I'd know it anywhere."

Just as he had hoped, a railway policeman loomed on the scene.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

The lady drew breath to speak, but Brackley got in first. He was not going to lose this opportunity.

"This lady seems to think I've stolen her bag, officer," he said. "I've done nothing of the sort. I'm a perfectly respectable person. My name is Walton, and I'm employed by Mallard's, the London jewelers. I've my identity card here if you'd —"

"That'll do, sir, that'll do," said the constable good humoredly. "Nobody's said anything about stealing."

"Of course not," the lady put in. "It's a mistake, that's what I keep telling him. But I want my bag."

"Quite so, madam." The officer was enjoying himself hugely. "Now let's have a look at them." He laid them side by side upon the platform. "They *are* alike, aren't they? No labels, no marks. You careless people! That's the way luggage gets lost, and then it's all blamed on the railways. What do you say, Mister —"

"Walton is the name."

"Have you any objection to my opening one of them?"

"Not the slightest."

"And you, madam?"

"Not at all."

The officer took Walton's suitcase, put it upon a bench, and unfastened the catch. The lid opened and the pitiless glare of the station lights illuminated what it held. They shone down upon the myriad facets of a mass of jewelry, hastily crammed together, and on top of all, a rubber-handled cosh, its tip hideous with a congealed mass of blood and hair — white hair, the hair of old Nicholas Mallard, who even now was lying hunched beneath his counter in Fentiman Street where Walton had left him.

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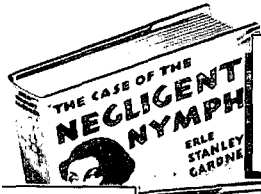

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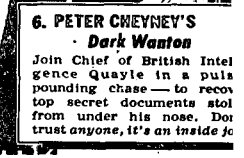

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